White
Eagles
Val Gielgud
Harold Brett

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WHITE EAGLES

By Val Gielgud

THE house of Konski, which furnished the leading characters for Val Gielgud's 'Old Swords,' appears again in this thrilling tale of Napoleon's campaign in Russia, and of the little group sent forward as spies ahead of the French army. The hero, Adam Konski, finds his lot cast with the French Secret Service. His companions are Charles Auric, Philippe Lauzun, and the boy Frontenac, whose appearance and personality puzzle Adam. The four ride east. Auric is wounded in a skirmish with the Cossacks, fighting to save Frontenac, who is no other than his wife, Diane. Diane saves him from the Cossack lances, but she cannot save him from the Spider, that mysterious woman who dominates the Court of Moscow. Against the tremendous backdrop of the retreat, the historic figures of Napoleon and his generals and the fierce Cossack leaders move across the stage. From this dramatic material Val Gielgud has woven not only a vivid historical romance, but an outstanding story of adventure.

White Eagles

Val Gielgud

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WHITE EAGLES

VAL GIELGUD

WHITE EAGLES

A Story of 1812

"Où est donc notre Vieille-Garde,
Ces vieux Chevau-Légers,
Et les Grenadiers moustachus,
Et l'Armée Polonaise?"
Théophile Lenartowicz, 1848.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
1929

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PROLOGUE

THE HOUSE OF KONSKI

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the noble Polish family of Konski had fallen on evil days. In this the family only shared the fate of their country. Brave, arrogant, stubborn upholders of that tradition of Privilege to which they owed all that in their eyes made life worth living, the Konskis had been automatically patriots, as they had been automatically tall men and fine soldiers, generation after generation. The idea of Poland was in their blood.

It was therefore natural enough, when the Russian general Suvarroff and the recreant Frederick William of Prussia clasped hands to complete the dastardy begun in earlier days between the Great Frederick and the equally great Catherine, under the name of the First Partition of Poland, that Josef Konski should have ridden out under the insurrectionary banner of Tadeusz Kosciuszko. It was, too, in the tradition of his line that he should

have died, pierced by Russian bayonets, under that same banner on the fatal field of Maciejowice.

At his death in 1794, when Suvarroff marched to quench the last embers of Polish independence in the blood of the defenders of Warsaw, Josef Konski left three sons: Jan, Ignatius, and Casimir. Jan was twenty-five; Ignatius twenty-two. Casimir, who had made a runaway love-match the year before and was now only twenty, was living in Cracow with his maternal grandmother, at a safe distance from his father's anger. By ill-chance, from their earliest years, Jan and Ignatius had hated one another. It may have been that they were rendered motherless early, and so never learned tolerance by example or precept. It may have been one of those cases of sheer temperamental incompatibility not uncommon in small families. But whatever the reasons, their father's death snapped the last link which had bound Jan Konski and his brother together under one roof. Jan, a born conservative of conservatives, and a stickler for the jots and tittles of legality in general, and his own position in particular, stood on no ceremony with an inconvenient relative. A sufferer from very early years from extreme short sight, he had been unable to fight beside his father. He was not altogether sorry. His oddly old-fashioned mentality deprecated the violence, and the — to him —

futility of the rebellion. He made no secret of political views which favoured an honourable dependency upon Prussia, or preferably Austria, as a makeweight to the hereditary Muscovite enemy. Which views, in the event, were instrumental in getting him confirmed in the possession of his estates by the personal intervention of Frederick William. He found it particularly hard to endure the intensely personal and aggressive nationalism of his brother Ignatius. . . .

Ignatius, who, most curiously for a Pole, combined dark flashing eyes and a mass of bristling red hair, had only been kept in the castle of Konski during the 1794 campaign by his intense affection for his father, and his consequent loyalty to Josef Konski's express orders. The news of that father's gallant death raised a crisis between Jan and himself out of what had previously been no more than a situation. That very evening high words were exchanged over their wine in the great hall of the castle. But Jan Konski never lost his temper nor raised his voice. Young Ignatius did both the one and the other.

Dressed formally in black, with fine lawn ruffles at neck and wrists, not even his perpetual stoop and his spectacles could rob Jan of the dignity that sat naturally upon any eldest son of his house. It was an oppressive dignity, too consciously assumed,

though consorting well enough with a very white face, thin, ungenerous lips, and a narrow, stubborn forehead. Yet Jan's face was not a bad one. There was intelligence in the eyes, strength in the jaw. He could never be fool nor coward. Equally he could never be hero . . . 'I only repeat, Ignatius,' he said, peering steadily through his steel-rimmed glasses, 'that this cannot go on. We dislike each other. Agreed. But I am master here now. Admitted. So you will go, and I will stay. Determined.' Jan leaned back in his chair, and opened a silver snuff-box with elegant spatulate fingers. His hobby was the carving of ivory figures . . . he habitually made presents to his friends of sets of chessmen . . .

Ignatius laughed, a little too loudly to be quite natural about it, gulped his wine, and stretched out his big spurred riding-boots with a ring and a clink on the bare hearthstone.

'You cold, calculating fish!' he said at last. He could give his brother fully six inches in height, with shoulders and thighs in proportion. He could ride anything with a back to it, and fence and shoot with the best. He had been old Josef's favourite, and educated accordingly to be a man of his hands. Yet Jan's eyes did not shift, while Ignatius sprawled and fidgeted and blustered in his chair, one hand even stretching for comfort to the bottle at his elbow.

Jan, too, had his support at hand. Behind him in the shadows, knitting quietly with a concentration almost frightening, sat his wife of a year. Ignatius loathed his sister-in-law. He had begun by pitying Wanda, whom his brother had so obviously married, in his own cold-blooded fashion, for her money. She had been born Walewska and owned great estates of her own far away to the south in Galicia. But Wanda had not appreciated his tentative consolation. She had even seemed satisfied with Jan, until her baby was born almost a cripple, leaving her weak, and sallow, and savage. 'Adam' they had called the brat — the first man forsooth! 'Adam,' whom even now Ignatius could hear crying wretchedly in an upper room, disregarded by his parents . . . Yes, Wanda's presence, like a baleful influence behind his brother's chair, made it very difficult for Ignatius . . .

He finished the bottle and rose, lazily stretching his great limbs.

'Where the devil does my dear brother suggest that I go?' he demanded.

'To the devil, like all fools,' said Jan pleasantly.

'If, by that, you are referring to my father ——' began Ignatius dangerously, 'I ——'

Jan flicked invisible dust from his left sleeve.

'We shared a father, I believe,' he said. 'Don't be more of a fool than you can help.'

'I know I can't fight you, but I can thrash you like a cur,' shouted Ignatius angrily, 'and by God I'll do just that if ——'

'If what?' asked Jan coolly.

There was a pause. Then Ignatius hurled his riding-whip across the hall with an oath.

'If I might suggest,' came Wanda's thin, harsh voice out of the shadows, 'a young man of such spirit and enthusiasm might find employment in Paris ——' and her needles clicked together faster than before.

For an instant Ignatius hesitated, clenching and unclenching his big hairy hands. He was wrestling with an almost irresistible impulse; the impulse to choke the lives out of Jan and Wanda between his fingers — an impulse which had been fostered during years of boyish contempt and bullying at Jan's hands, been swollen by the sudden realization that physically he was to Jan as wolf to cat, and been inflamed by the mingled feelings of grief and rage with which he had received the black news from Maciejowice. His eyes felt hot, his throat dry. And still Wanda knitted, Jan stared glassily behind his spectacles, and the child Adam wailed feebly from the distant room.

Suddenly Ignatius laughed. He laughed loudly and coarsely, and stooped, laughing, to pick up his riding-whip from the floor of the hall.

'By God, Jan!' said he, 'you nearly foxed me again, you cunning devil! You keep a pistol in the pocket of those elegant breeches of yours, don't you? Or it would have suited your book finely had I rushed off, like the young idiot you take me for, to die like a lunatic in Warsaw, wouldn't it? But Wanda spoke too soon and spoiled the pretty plan! I'm grateful, Wanda, my dear!'

He caught up his hat from the long table, and swept his sister-in-law an exaggerated bow.

'I have long desired to see Paris,' added Ignatius, putting on his hat and buckling his sword-belt.

'Admirably said,' murmured Jan, taking more snuff.

'I will not forget to bring you both presents when I come back,' called Ignatius from the doorway. 'A rattle, too, for my poor little devil of a nephew — if he lives!'

With which parting shot he swaggered out into the courtyard, and standing with straddled legs while he pulled on his riding-gloves, bawled for a groom to bring him a horse.

There followed a scurry of feet, mingled with Ignatius's cheerful oaths, the stamp and whinnying

of an excited stallion, and finally the clatter of hooves as another adventurer rode out of the courtyard to seek his fortune, with no more to aid him to it than the clothes he stood up in, five pieces of gold, a horse, a sword, his muscles, and his wits. And, as he rode away, Ignatius lifted up his voice and sang, for the most part deplorably of wine and women, and even more deplorably out of tune. . . .

As the sound of his departure died away, Jan Konski rose deliberately and shut the door of the hall.

'Will you see to the child, Wanda?' he said, turning. 'He is crying.' The ghost of a smile hovered on his thin lips. His wife laid down her knitting and moved unhurriedly to the other door.

'I am pleased with you, Jan,' she said quietly, and passed through it.

In the far room the crying ceased. And the ghostly smile on Jan Konski's face suddenly achieved reality.

It was sixteen years before Ignatius Konski saw his home again; sixteen of the most astonishing years in the history of Europe; the years when the French eagles rose, phœnix-like, from the flaming pyre of the Revolution, to follow a subaltern of artillery to the Vistula and the Elbe, by way of Lodi,

Marengo, and Austerlitz; years in which the cavalry of the Grand Army stabled their horses in the capitals from Madrid to Berlin and Vienna.

Somewhere in the ranks of that cavalry rode Ignatius Konski. When Jan tricked him into losing his temper and leaving the Konski castle, he had made his way first to Paris, and thence into northern Italy in the wake of the armies of the Republic. When Dombrowski organized his Legion of exiled Poles for the service of that Cisalpine Republic carved by the young General Bonaparte out of his Italian conquests, Ignatius Konski was one of the first to join his standards. That Legion was the root whence were to spring all the famous Polish corps of Napoleon's armies. It marched under two flags — the tricolour of the Republic and the amaranth banner blazoned with the white eagle of Poland. And, more than a century later, a descendant of Ignatius Konski's was to see those same flags, captured by the Russians during the retreat from Moscow, restored under escort to reconstituted Poland by the Bolsheviks, under the terms of the Treaty of Riga in 1921. A hundred years of history lie in the folds of that stained and faded silk, which is so carefully preserved to-day in the Warsaw Museum.

Ignatius had been in Poland at the time of Eylau and Friedland. But it was not until after Wagram

that he returned to the castle of Konski, a full colonel in the Polish Light Horse of the Guard — that regiment formed under Krasinski after Eylau, in recognition of the gallantry shown on many fields by the Polish cavalry of Napoleon's armies. The place, when he came to it, seemed changeless as ever. But he had not been in it for a day before he realized that it was only a shell; or rather the tomb of a dying man, who had chosen to end his life in his mausoleum.

Wanda was dead; had been dead eleven years. So much Jan repeated, over and over again, to the huge, strapping figure of his brother towering beside his chair. Ignatius looked down at him, and shivered. He had starved in Spain, charged through the blizzard at Eylau, faced a violent death a score of times. But nothing had sent that shiver down his spine like the sight of his brother, wrinkled, yellow-faced, and grim beside his empty hearth, perfectly dressed in his black clothes, his heart broken and dead within him. The phrase, detestable enough in itself, for once was true: Jan Konski's heart had been broken by his wife's death. Watching his brother, Ignatius realized something of the tragedy of Jan's life; knew at last that Jan had adored Wanda; and that she, like every one else, had always believed that he had married her for her money — a

belief which Jan, in matters of emotion hopelessly incapable of self-expression, could never convince her was unfair, unjustified, and in all respects damnable for both of them. She died. And Jan sat and brooded over his regrets and his memories, letting his estates go to ruin, his peasants idle, his son run wild. Not even his prodigal brother's return could, at first, rouse the faintest spark of interest or resentment.

Save for the cellar, which had remained tolerably well stocked, Ignatius found little in the home of his forbears worthy of his attention. In short, he found it — and called it frequently and emphatically — a damned dull hole! He asked himself why he had bothered to come back, and cursed the curiosity which answered his question. There only remained his nephew as a slightly unusual factor, causing speculation and inviting a certain amount of criticism.

Not that Ignatius really approved of young Adam. The boy made a marvellous audience, of course. He would sit for hours, with his abnormally long arms round his knees, his pale, serious face thrust forward — from birth he was slightly hunch-backed — listening to his uncle's talks of the Great Wars. It was natural enough. Adam, like so many delicate boys, had in him all the yearnings of suppressed mili-

tarism. And he came of a fighting stock into the bargain. To a boy who for almost sixteen years had been repressed by a sullen, gloomy father, who spoke of the new movements stirring Europe, headed and embattled by France, in terms as of a puerile, infectious, and tiresome disease, the arrival of his uncle was equivalent to that of Ares himself. Ignatius would sprawl in a chair, drinking glass after glass of wine, or stride up and down the great hall, all clanking spurs and trailing, clattering sabre, and talk of sieges, forlorn hopes, last stands, encounters, and ambuscades, till Adam's eyes, shining with excitement, almost burst from their sockets. Ignatius looked the part as well. He remained in essentials much as he had been when he rode away in '94. But his bristle of red hair was streaked with grey. He had grown a fiery moustache. A sword-cut scarred his left cheek, and ended with a black patch that hid an empty eye-socket — relic of a clash with guerrillas in Spain. He talked well and fluently, enjoying the sound of his own voice, harsh, but true as a cavalry trumpet, from the shouting of commands through musketry and the roaring of stricken fields. Marshal Murat was his *beau idéal*, and Ignatius wore diamond rings on his gnarled fingers, carried a gold-hilted sabre, and used a leopard-skin for a saddle-cloth, almost persuading himself thereby that

his road too lay close to a marshal's bâton and a Grand Duchy — perhaps further yet. Had not Murat dreamed of the throne of Poland? And was not Ignatius of a Polish noble house?

Behind the candles and the red glowing wine at his uncle's elbow, Adam seemed to see, as Ignatius talked, the very presence of the Grand Army, and beside it a vision of Poland restored to independent life and dignity by that army's weapons. In the words, rather thickened sometimes by wine, often embellished by a lively imagination, which poured from Ignatius's thick lips, Adam could hear the growling of the guns, the rattle and cheering of Murat's cuirassiers and dragoons, the implacable measured tramp of the Guard moving to the attack; could see the flames from gun-muzzles, the flicker and sheen of swords and breastplates; the tall bearskins and white breeches; Ney's bulldog jaw, Murat's ringlets and gold-knobbed riding-switch, Poniatowski's careless gallantry of bearing; and last of all, a vaguely terrible figure: a little man, in a plain three-cornered hat with a cheap cockade, wearing a grey overcoat. Surrounded by tall generals in blue coats lavishly decorated with golden oak-leaves, this little man was as dominating as he was shabby. When he spoke of him, Ignatius seemed to sprawl more, and talk more foolishly, losing all dignity. In the imagi-

nation of young Adam, he loomed gigantic. Behind him was a record of invincibility. Before him lay as his next task the restoration of Poland. What wonder if to Adam Konski the mere imagined presence of Napoleon was irresistible in its fascination?

Ignatius stayed in the castle thirteen days exactly before he brought to a conclusion the quarrel with his brother which had begun sixteen years before. Young Adam, who had been riding alone in the plain beyond the Niemen, practising sword-drill awkwardly on horseback with the aid of an old silver-headed cane and his imagination, had gone straight to the stables, dismounted there, and walked stiffly and rather wide at the knees up the stone steps to the outer door. That massive door, with its iron studs and creaking rusty hinges, always stood open on summer evenings, and Adam crossed the threshold unobserved.

His father and his uncle were sitting opposite each other beside the hearth; Jan, snuff-box in hand, very stiff and pokerish; Ignatius sprawling as usual, the wine-glass stem between his fingers dangerously tilted. Adam, watching from behind them and at an angle, could imagine the prim thin line of his father's mouth, the slightly glazed leer in his uncle's single eye. But he had no time for picturesque imaginings. It was the voices that had

pulled him up at the doorway; they were savage and angry; they scared him. As they clashed and parried, like duelling swords, Adam had the most curious and repellent sensation. He had had it before in the face of anger unabashed — when he had seen a groom thrash a dog, and particularly once, when he was still tiny, and a peasant had insulted his mother: his father had had the man flogged in the courtyard — tied to a cart, with his shirt pulled over his head to bare his grimy back. . . . Ever since then anger had made Adam think of raw, naked, quivering flesh. He shrank from it, and was utterly fascinated by it. . . . Pale-faced, he stood by the door, and watched, and listened.

'She disgraced her name, herself, Poland,' Jan Konski was saying in his hard shrill voice. 'Am I to countenance her betrayal of my wife's kinsman?'

'Walewski knows on which side his bread is buttered!' sneered Ignatius. 'If he puts up with it, you can, surely?'

The lid of Jan's snuff-box snapped down furiously.

'I, thank God, remain old-fashioned,' he said. 'Marie Walewska is no better than ——'

Ignatius sprang to his feet, splashing wine over his boots and the hearthstone. 'Hold your tongue!' he flared. 'Marie Walewska did her duty! She

obeyed the Emperor, as I do! As all good Poles must do!'

'A little French-Italian condottiere!' snarled Jan. 'My cousin to lose his honour to that.'

'Your cousin! Impotent old fool! The Emperor honoured him!' said Ignatius, and laughed.

Jan in his turn rose stiffly to his feet. The brothers stood there together side by side. Adam was so used to seeing his father sitting, that he was surprised to see that he was so bowed, looked so old, on his feet.

'In my opinion,' said Jan, with a certain quiet dignity, 'your Emperor is an adventurer, his uniform which you wear is a disgrace to a gentleman, and Marie Walewska is a whore!' Only for the last phrase he twisted up his head, and almost spat it at his brother.

Ignatius flushed crimson. For a second he hesitated, his lips working. Then, words failing him, he pitched the contents of his half-empty glass into Jan's face.

'I think that answers you!' he said hoarsely.

Jan said nothing; only took a fine lace-edged handkerchief from his left sleeve, and wiped his face.

'Where do you keep your pistols?' added Ignatius.

His brother seemed not to hear.

'You have spoiled this shirt irrevocably,' he said at last, querulously. 'I must change it.'

Ignatius gripped one thin bony shoulder. 'I can't shoot a coward,' he said slowly. 'You cur, Jan! You skulking, pitiful hound! God, I don't know whom to pity more! You, who played craven in '93, or that poor devil of a boy, who no doubt will follow your example in a year or two. Oh, yes — make no mistake! Friedland did not finish it. There will be a reckoning with Russia, and a new Poland. The Emperor has said it. And I shall be the only Konski to ride behind him into Moscow.'

He swept an arm round the hall in a great gesture, ending with the spread fingers of one hand pointing at the tarnished line of portraits along one wall.

'They may thank God they are dead!' added Ignatius, and dropped his hand. 'Pah, Jan! You encourage me to melodrama! I need fresh air!' He turned away from his brother and strode to the door.

As he reached it, he uttered a startled exclamation. Across the courtyard, bare-headed, crouching ungainly in the saddle, galloped his nephew, plying whip and spur, so that in the summer dusk the sparks flew up under the hoofs of his horse. Ignatius cried out to him. But Adam took no notice, did not look back. He disappeared among the trees, riding south and west.

Staring, Ignatius turned. Jan Konski was standing in the middle of the hall, taking something from his breeches pocket. There came a report and a flash. Jan's left hand went automatically to his chest; his body crumpled like an empty sack; sagged; collapsed. As it struck the floor, a little object burst from the clothes and rolled to Ignatius Konski's feet. Mechanically he stooped and picked it up. It was Wanda's wedding-ring.

CHAPTER I

PROMISE OF SPRING

OVER all Europe, during the earlier months of the year 1812, had brooded the strangest calm. It was not the calm of peace or tranquillity — to those things men had been strangers for over two decades; almost since the Bastille, like a modern Jericho, had fallen before the menace of Danton's voice and the thunder of the 'Marseillaise.' It was a calm, sinister and oppressive, like some purple thunder-cloud looming on a distant horizon, and growing daily nearer, huger, more obviously charged with peril.

That there must be a final decision between Russia and France all knew. But to bring that decision to the arbitrament of battle all seemed equally to hesitate, as though in fear of what might follow from disaster to either of the protagonists. Napoleon himself, though his columns were moving in vast contingents from all the western nations to their final gathering in the Polish plains, seemed uncertain whether or not to launch them eastwards. While he sat in Dresden, presiding over that splendid *parterre* of subject or allied kings, his envoys, and those of Alexander, drove and galloped along

the dusty roads, wearing horse after horse to death in carrying the elegantly false phrases of diplomacy to and from Wilno. To those couriers alone, perhaps, was revealed the true significance, the terrific drama of the impending struggle of the Emperors. For they alone, and of these Narbonne in particular, within the space of a few short days' travel, saw both Napoleon and Alexander in the flesh during those days of suspense.

The former, now beginning to stouten rapidly, casting his eyes over his maps, saw France secure, Germany apparently tranquil, Prussia crushed, Austria an ally. Only remained the exasperation of the insurrection in Spain, and the English blockade.

In the slim elegant figure of the latter, Alexander the First, Tsar of all the Russias, lies concealed one of the enigmas of history. For hours together he would sit in one of his vast palaces, his pale eyes straying over the stiff laced figures of his courtiers, revolving curiously mingled schemes of idealism and ambition. Men whispered that behind those wavering eyes lurked the shadow of ever-present fear, born in the dark hours when, as Tsarevitch, he was made privy to his father's murder; and that his ideals were awakened only to drug his conscience. But whether that is true or no, in the last days before the

storm broke upon his dominions, Alexander stood firm, showing neither weakness or fear.

It was the evening of May 21, when Narbonne drove in over the Dresden bridge and reported to his master. Napoleon was alone in a small study. He had just risen from dinner and was standing over a table spread with a map, dotting it with pins with coloured heads, when his Mameluke announced Narbonne. He did not look up.

'I will see him,' he said.

Narbonne came in, hot, dusty, and thirsty. A diplomat of the Old Régime, he had assumed the practical good sense of the Empire, without losing his formality and the bearing of his caste. For a little he stood silent, conscious of little but his great weariness — of body, for he had come fast and far; of mind, for his mission had failed.

'Well?' said the Emperor.

In the light from the candles on the mantelpiece behind him his small, fat, and beautifully modelled white hands looked strangely unsubstantial, moving over the great map.

'The Tsar,' began Narbonne in his dry official voice, 'cannot be shaken.'

Napoleon raised his head and looked intently at the envoy.

'His final words, Sire, were these: "I know I am

no such captain as the Emperor Napoleon. I know I have no captains to match against him. That alone should convince you that I desire to avoid war.'" Narbonne hesitated an instant before adding the last words of Alexander's message. '"But peace will not be signed upon my soil."'

Napoleon laughed harshly. Perhaps the compliment gratified him. Perhaps he was glad to be quit at last of the burden of uncertainty and suspense. Perhaps the dignity of his enemy's reply pleased him, making Alexander worthier in his eyes. . . .

He dismissed Narbonne and sent for Berthier. And while the dusk outside his window deepened into the short summer night, he and the chief of staff completed the plans already prepared and made out the morrow's marching orders for the Grand Army.

A few hours later the same night, in another little room in Dresden, two other people stood by a window, looking out into the night, and contemplating the promise of that spring — a young man and a girl. The man's arm, in a tight green sleeve, was round the girl's shoulders. They stood very still, speaking little, their hearts quaintly torn between the happiness of the present moments and the fear they shared for the future. For they were lovers, married just over a year, and a soldier had just

brought the young man his orders. He was detailed for the Emperor's escort, when Napoleon should drive out eastwards from Dresden the next morning to begin the war.

The pair were worth more than a casual glance. They had, in fact, been the cynosure of many eyes in the Saxon capital the last few weeks, as true representatives of that dynamic generation which was changing the face of established Europe. They had not only physical beauty and the carriage of a conquering race, but that something which had sprung from the Revolution — that fire of spiritual conviction which scorched the Alliance of the Kings in '93 and forged the Empire; the justified arrogance of youth that sees its ideals fulfilled through its own courage and capacity.

Between them they stood for much. Charles Auric was the son of a Breton lawyer in a small way. His father had warmly espoused the cause of the Revolution, sat in the convention, and steered his way safely through the rocks and shallows of the Gironde and the Mountain. A supporter from the first of the Consulate, he had made friends with Joseph Bonaparte, and through his good offices had secured for his son a commission in the army. Given his start, Charles had required no further assistance. At twenty-four he was a captain in the Chasseurs

of the Guard, at the Emperor's very elbow. Thrice wounded and twice decorated, with the figure and face of a young Apollo, his career was assured.

His wife, Diane, was the offspring of more romantic circumstances. Her father, the Marquis de Frontenac, sailed with Lafayette, when that strange mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous left France to help George Washington. De Frontenac, like many others before and since, in discoveringAmerica found that it was good. More intelligent than most of his order — his family was one of the oldest in Touraine — he preferred the horizons, for all their vastness, the possibilities, however crude they seemed, of this new country, to the out-of-date feudalism which he believed to be rotting the core of France. He remained in America, and married a Boston lady, who was deeply intrigued by his title and his appropriately aristocratic appearance. The marriage was not a success. The Marquis was young, French, and hot-blooded. Janet Van Arst was of Dutch descent and Puritan upbringing. The consequences were inevitable. After Diane's birth, Janet preferred to leave de Frontenac to his mistresses, and returned to her parents in Boston. She took the child with her. But the Marquis knew a trick worth two of that. He rode into Boston one midnight with three friends, kidnapped his child, and

sailed at dawn the next day in an English frigate, having bribed one of the crew to let him on board and deny all knowledge of him thereafter. The frigate having cleared the harbour, de Frontenac introduced himself to the captain, and entirely captivated the latter by his perfect manners, his judgment of wine, and the sentimental appeal — conclusive in the case of all sailors — of the squalling but otherwise attractive Diane.

With the establishment of the Empire, the Marquis abandoned England for Paris. Though he had found the English amiable, he could not reconcile himself to their climate, their cooking, and the teeth of their women-folk. Besides, he approved of Napoleon's appeal to the old families to return. He acknowledged it gratefully, and took with him Diane, now a rather coltish young person in her teens. The passing of a few years altered her to an authentic beauty, slim and clean-limbed as any boy, with a broad forehead, a short straight nose, and grey eyes that saw most things and feared nothing. She met Charles Auric, on leave from campaigning in Spain, fell in love with him, and married him out of hand. The Marquis gave her his blessing and retired, smiling sardonically, to the family château in Touraine. Deprived of the responsibility of his daughter's welfare, he felt free to enjoy himself once

more. The relief was considerable; and several of his neighbours had pretty and accommodating wives. . . .

'So it goes forward,' whispered Diane.

Charles's fingers tightened round her bare shoulders. The braid on his sleeve rasped at her smooth skin.

'We march at dawn,' he said at last.

'Do you blame me for coming?' she asked him suddenly.

Charles shook his head.

'I knew it would be war,' she went on vehemently. 'I could feel it, Charles. I sat there in Paris, and I felt it coming. I could not let you leave Dresden and not come to you. Are you glad?'

He kissed her fingers. 'The reckoning with Russia has to be made,' he said gravely. 'We shall finish with Alexander this time.'

The girl turned from the window and faced him.

'Are you sure, Charles? Do you really believe that?'

Auric laughed gaily. 'My darling, the Emperor goes with us,' he said, and kissed her. 'Listen!'

Over the rough cobbles of the street below clattered a group of cockaded riders.

'There go the orders for the brigades,' muttered Charles. Diane saw that his eyes were shining with

excitement. Her own were shining, too, but for another reason.

'Four hundred thousand men!' said Charles exultantly, and caught his wife into his arms. 'The last campaign, my darling! We shall have no more worlds to conquer after Moscow!'

Her arms tightened round his neck. But even as he returned her embrace, she could hear him humming softly under his breath. It was the same song which Napoleon was whistling — most damnably out of tune, thought Constant, his valet — as he paced to and fro that night in the little green-panelled study: — 'Malbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre . . . ne sait qu'il reviendra.'

CHAPTER II

FAIR EXCHANGE

It was Sunday the 21st of June when at sunrise, the earliest sunrise of the year, the vanguard of the Grand Army rose from its bivouacs to make the crossing of the Niemen into Russia. Napoleon rose even before dawn. By two he was in the saddle, and riding towards the high bluffs that fringe the river opposite Poniemunie to reconnoitre for suitable crossing-places. He wore the green uniform of the Chasseurs of the Guard, and behind him rode Berthier, his chief of staff, a general of sappers, and Ignatius Konski as orderly officer. The Imperial escort was furnished in daily routine by a squadron from each of the cavalry units of the Old Guard: chasseurs, horse grenadiers, Dutch Lancers, and Polish Light Horse. And the orderly officer was provided accordingly by the Polish squadron, which was on duty that day.

The little band rode slowly up towards the bluffs, and there, in the shelter of a small coppice, the main guard of the regiment, under a certain Colonel Pagowski, was drawn up for inspection. The troopers made a brave show under the morning sun, in

their crimson tunics, tall *czapkas*, pennons fluttering in the light breeze. Two or three horses stamped impatiently, and a scabbard rang startlingly loud against a stirrup-iron. Otherwise all was very still.

Napoleon dismounted. Behind him Ignatius Konski, left hand on hip, threw out his chest, and sat his charger with an air of defiant swagger. Berthier was examining the river-bank through his glass.

The Emperor ran his eyes over the steady ranks, and turned abruptly to Ignatius, who was still staring magnificently into the blue.

'When you can spare a moment to attend to me ——' said Napoleon brusquely. There was a glint of amusement in his eyes.

Ignatius, flushing brick-red from his tight military collar to the roots of his fiery hair, flung himself from his horse with a great jingle and clatter, drew himself up, clinked his spurs, and saluted.

'I desire the loan of two Polish uniforms for Berthier and myself,' continued the Emperor. 'I see no need to advertise my presence to Russian scouts on the farther bank.'

Ignatius spoke to Pagowski in rapid Polish. At once the colonel and his nearest subaltern stripped to their shirts. Napoleon and Berthier followed their example, and the four men stood shivering

a little in the keen dawn wind. They proceeded to exchange their tunics. But Pagowski had forgotten that Napoleon, for all his dominions and power, was a small man. Pagowski and his lieutenant were strapping cavalry soldiers, over six feet tall. In the former's tunic the Emperor felt himself ridiculous, though the faces of the lancers before him did not change. As he was greater in most things than most men, so to ridicule or the suspicion of it he was more sensitive than most. He hurled an oath, fortunately in Corsican, at Pagowski, and tore off his tunic violently.

'Are there no Poles but brainless great oxen?' he demanded furiously of Ignatius Konski.

Speechless with embarrassment and humiliation, Ignatius in his turn ran his eyes hurriedly along the two ranks of troopers. Then his jaw dropped, and his eyes bulged alarmingly. Sitting, most deplorably slouched in his saddle, in the rear rank, was his nephew, Adam Konski, in the uniform of a private of lancers. The disgrace of it drove even the vision of his Emperor, shivering in his shirt, from Ignatius's mind. He — there is no other word for it — goggled helplessly at his nephew.

Napoleon, stamping his feet with cold and irritation, followed his orderly officer's transfixed gaze.

'Call out that man!' he snapped.

Ignatius succeeded in choking an order from his tightened throat. Adam dismounted, and came forward, head as usual slouched forward, and shoulders stooping like a student's. But he moved well from the hips, and was light on his feet as a cat, for all his heavy boots and clumsy spurs.

Pagowski stammered excuses: the boy had only been accepted in the regiment for his family name; one that deserved well of all Polish patriots. His carriage was bad, but he rode well, and had shown pluck. If His Majesty would overlook his appearance . . .

Napoleon cut him short abruptly. 'All I want is his tunic,' he snapped. 'It looks as if it might fit me.'

Ignatius Konski worked off some of his repressed emotion by tearing Adam's tunic from his shoulders with quite needless violence, before handing it to the Emperor.

Adam's lips quivered uncontrollably. For ten years past — the ten most impressionable years of his life — he had thought of Napoleon Bonaparte as a hero, almost as a god. And now his idol stood before him in the flesh: a little stout man, with a head palpably too large for his body and remarkable grey eyes, now glinting with extremely human exasperation.

The Emperor mistook the meaning of Adam's muscular control. He imagined that the boy also was shivering with cold. A natural love of rather coarse practical joking, remaining from his earliest days in Corsica, encouraged him to shock Ignatius Konski further. He held out one plump, finely formed hand and took his own uniform coat from Colonel Pagowski. Then he handed it to Adam, with a gruff order to put it on.

That done he turned, clambered rather clumsily into the saddle of his little white Polish cob, and rode away towards the Niemen, followed by Berthier, impassive as ever, and Ignatius Konski, muttering incoherent oaths into his heavy moustache.

Adam stood looking after the Emperor in a sort of daze. One hand, feeling for reality, strayed unconsciously over the shabby green cloth of the old 'Guides' uniform and fingered the tarnished star of the Legion of Honour on his left breast. The coat fitted abominably. He was only too conscious that in his borrowed plumes he must cut a figure of fantastic absurdity before the mocking eyes of his comrades of the lancers. But that did not matter. Pagowski might scowl and the uhlans might make a butt of him for weeks. But nothing could take from him that moment in which he had met the full gaze of the new Cæsar, and roused at least a fleeting

interest in those uncanny, implacable eyes, which gave the impression of being always fixed on far-distant horizons. At that moment Adam Konski, in the arrogant splendour of his nineteen years and his youth, would have followed his Emperor to torture, fire, or hell; and followed exultantly.

Of such sort in the year 1812 was the magic that lay within the folds of an old green coat belonging to the man who had been no more than a Corsican subaltern of guns.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRES OF SAINT JOHN

On the 29th of June the Grand Army marched into Wilno. And that evening Ignatius sent for his nephew to come to his quarters. He was in a bad humour, for the weather was overpoweringly hot. Also, like so many big, self-confident men, he was superstitious almost beyond belief, and an incident that had befallen him a few days previously had impressed him more than he would have cared to acknowledge. He had crossed the Niemen with the remainder of the Guard on the night of the feast of Saint John. All along the river had blazed and flared the bonfires of that festival of midsummer, honoured to this day by the peasantry of Lithuania. The river passed, Ignatius had turned in his saddle to look back at the red glow in the night sky. It seemed to pulsate — to rise and fall like firelight in a dark room. While he watched it a ragged figure rose as if out of the earth and clutched at his bridle.

'Go back!' croaked a thin voice — the voice of an old Lithuanian peasant in the penultimate stages of consumption. 'Go back, if you are wise!'

Ignatius swore at him. The old man let go the rein and stepped back.

'Who leaves the fires of Saint John at his back, goes to meet the fires of the Devil face to face!' he cried, pointing to the glow in the western sky and swinging a bony arm towards the east. 'That sky, too, shall burn!' And before Ignatius could decide whether or not further to investigate this tattered Jeremiah, the consumptive had laughed harshly and slunk back into the darkness whence he had come. Of course the fellow was crazy, half-starved, and dying — a detail of no possible account. Yet Ignatius, remembering how the Emperor's horse had stumbled on the Niemen's bank, and how Napoleon had laughed gaily, 'A Roman would have gone back,' as though wantonly defying ill-omen, pored over a map, calculating the length and numbers of days' marches to Moscow, frowned, fidgeted uneasily, and for once forgot to finish his bottle of wine.

His reception, when Adam came in and saluted, was hardly encouraging to a boy of nineteen, dusty and weary after a long day in the saddle.

'Personally I would have preferred not to see you again,' began Ignatius, brutally enough. 'I wish to be frank with you. I disliked your father. But you share my blood and my name. You disgraced both

by this masquerading as a trooper in Pagowski's regiment! Why, boy, you can't stand up straight!'

Adam flushed angrily. 'You are my superior officer, as well as my uncle,' he said.

Ignatius laughed. 'Is this a threat?' he cried. 'Do you hear that, Kestner? The little puppy is pretending to show his teeth!'

Adam realized that behind his uncle's chair was another man: a tall, thin figure looking out of the window into the narrow, roaring Wilno street. At Ignatius's words this man turned abruptly. Adam saw a face that reminded him of a stork: a thin, beaky nose, a high forehead accentuated by premature baldness, a receding chin, and an expression that was at the same time wise and utterly ludicrous.

'Colonel de Konski,' said the stranger, 'I think we had better get to the point. You have told your nephew why you did *not* mean to invite him to your quarters. It is more important that he should know why you did so.'

Ignatius accepted the snub with a sullen nod.

'I did so at His Majesty's personal desire,' said Ignatius. 'I present you to Monsieur Kestner, of His Majesty's Personal Service. And now, thank God, I can wash my hands of you again! I trust you will not disgrace the name further!' With which amiable parting thrust Ignatius rose noisily and

withdrew into another room, carrying his bottle with him.

Monsieur Kestner smiled, as if smiling hurt the muscles of his face, and drew forward a chair.

'Sit down, young man,' he said. 'Your uncle, like so many good soldiers, is a trifle — shall we say brusque? — in manner.' His voice was harsh and guttural, but his eyes twinkled pleasantly. They were narrow, pale eyes, quickly moving, and very much alive.

Adam sat down thankfully enough, wondering what on earth was coming next. The drab realities of three days' campaigning had taken a good deal of the gilt off the gingerbread of war. Three days' riding on short rations in the great heat, scouting for an enemy apparently non-existent, had rather dimmed the exaltation of those dawn moments when he had seen Napoleon face to face and worn his uniform. Also he resented savagely his uncle's reference to his father. In any circumstances it was cruel. In the particular circumstances of their respective ranks it was mean . . . He pulled himself together to listen to Kestner's thick Alsatian French.

'His Majesty,' Kestner was saying, sitting comfortably as he spoke, 'has an eye for men. I speak to you in confidence, Monsieur de Konski, knowing you to be a Polish gentleman, and believing you to

be a man of intelligence. You will agree it required the insight of genius to find the bâtons of marshals in the knapsacks of swaggering Gascons like Murat, bulldog sergeants like Ney, schoolmasters like Davout.'

Adam stared. Who could this man be, who named so casually, so critically the chiefs of the Grand Army? Kestner may have read the expression of puzzled curiosity on the boy's face.

'I am — no one in particular,' he went on, spreading out deprecatingly two thin, white hands. 'A friend of General Savary's, I have, now and then, been of assistance to His Majesty. I was bidden see you on his behalf.'

Adam sat up very straight in his chair. Even he knew of General Savary — chief of the Emperor's Personal Secret Service.

'As an expression of good will to your country, which is dear to His Majesty,' continued Kestner smoothly, 'and to your family, which has served both France and Poland well, I am empowered to offer you, Monsieur de Konski, a lieutenant's commission in the Polish Light Horse of the Guard.'

Adam sprang to his feet, stammering incoherently, but Kestner shook his head, smiling again that tight-lipped smile, which was as terrifying as any scowl. 'A moment, my young friend! I have not

yet completed my task. There is a condition attached.'

'Well?' demanded Adam hoarsely.

Kestner frowned and deliberately set the tips of his fingers together.

'There are times and places,' he said sententiously, 'when service can more readily and better be performed in other ways than by wielding a sabre. You will forgive me, Monsieur de Konski, if I hint to you that with your — er — special physique, to campaign with the cavalry in Russia may not be the best way ——'

But Adam shared with Ignatius, indeed with most of his line, a fiery temper. Any reference, however slight or guarded, to his stooping carriage and hunched shoulders flicked him on the raw.

'Call me a cripple, and have done with it!' he cried. 'Was your offer a joke? Why offer me a sword, if to wear it will spoil the look of the parade of the Guard? By God, Monsieur Kestner, I may be a cripple, and a boy, but I can hold a pistol straight ——'

He broke off. His bitter words might have been addressed to a wax dummy. Kestner was gazing quietly at the dirty rafters above his head.

'You do not love the Russians, Monsieur de Konski?' he said, taking no notice of Adam's interruption.

'I'm a Pole,' retorted Adam sullenly. He felt very young and inadequate in the face of the smooth-speaking, passionless Alsatian.

'*Bien* — the question was admittedly superfluous, though the young occasionally seek heroism in astonishing originalities — but not even the youngest of Poles would affect Russian sympathies. I must apologize.'

He paused and leaned forward, emphasizing his next words with a restless forefinger.

'His Majesty requires information,' said Kestner, and now his sentences were rapped out, like peas falling on a drum. 'What extent of victory is needed to bring the Emperor Alexander to terms? Must we occupy Moscow, St. Petersburg, or only Smolensk? As we advance irresistibly, what will be the effect on Russian opinion, especially in Moscow?'

Adam laughed. 'I am to go as a spy?' he asked curtly.

'Among His Majesty's servants,' explained Kestner, 'are certain officers known as "The Sacred Flies." Why ——' he shrugged his shoulders. 'They will be sent into Russia to gather this necessary information, as before they have gone in advance of the Grand Army into Prussia, Austria, and Spain. I offer you a place among them as the price of your commission. Your comrades will be French-

men of the old *noblesse*, apparently fugitives from the tyranny of the Empire. You, Monsieur de Konski, having quarrelled with your uncle Ignatius, seek the protection of the Emperor Alexander. You understand me?'

'In short,' repeated Adam, 'I am to go into Russia as a spy!'

Kestner laughed. 'If you prefer an ugly name ——' he shrugged. 'Will you go as a spy?'

Adam moistened his dry lips with his tongue. He longed to dash his fist into the Alsatian's face, and to restrain that mad fierce impulse he turned away his head. On the wall was a stained cracked mirror in a tarnished frame, and he glimpsed his reflection — his head bent forward, his shoulders hunched . . .

His eyes filled with tears, which he blinked back angrily. And, as if to comfort him, there came back the memory of the hour when he had fingered the Emperor's star on his own left breast —— After all, it was the Emperor, not this damned Alsatian, who required him to go as a spy! The Emperor, who had made Poland a Grand Duchy; would make her once more a kingdom . . .

He unbuckled his sabre and held out the hilt to Kestner. 'I am at your service, monsieur,' he said.

Kestner nodded indifferently. He had never expected anything else. If only he knew, thought

Adam Konski, how near he had been to sudden and violent death!

'But I doubt if even that would have moved him —cold-blooded fish!' he muttered, as he followed the Alsatian down the dark, malodorous staircase.

On the threshold they halted. A battery had just rumbled past, and one of the horses, overdriven in the long march across Europe, had fallen in its tracks, been summarily shot, and the carcase dragged aside to clear the roadway. It lay, sprawled and grotesque, under the very noses of Kestner and Adam Konski as they emerged from Ignatius's quarters.

The Alsatian hardly noticed; certainly evinced neither interest nor disgust. But Adam leaned against the doorpost, and went off into a peal of laughter.

'Come along,' said Kestner, turning impatiently.

Adam's laughter ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

'Look!' he said, pointing to the dead horse, already black with flies.

Kestner raised an eyebrow. 'An unpleasant sight,' he remarked coldly, 'but I fail to understand ——'

Adam nodded. 'Quite so,' he said, and his voice took on an outrageous parody of the Alsatian's.

'But I should have thought you would have rejoiced to have observed certain flies, fat and well-liking, engaged in the nobly patriotic duty of clearing their country of carrion!'

And again he laughed in Kestner's face.

CHAPTER IV

THE SACRED FLIES

It is not, I think, an exaggeration to maintain that during that short half-hour's interview with General Savary's 'Alsatian jackal' — as mentally he dubbed him — Adam Konski lost the poor remainder of his youth. The melancholy dreariness of his boyhood had aged him far beyond his years. The gallantry of his gesture in running away from home had been sadly tarnished by his father's suicide and his very real experiences of military service as a humble trooper. Of his dreams and his idealisms remained only a Poland that should be free, and the Emperor in whose service he could draw sword to fight for that freedom. Kestner had stolen his sword, and made of his service a thing almost ludicrous, and certainly despicable. Glorify spying as you will, it remains a sordid, secret, loathsome service: one that perforce must deal in a currency of lying, treachery, intrigue, and with knaves, fools, and blackguards for instruments. And this service was the only one he, Adam Konski, a Polish gentleman, was found worthy to render to the Emperor to whom he looked to redeem his country!

As he walked in silence, deliberately half a pace

behind Kestner, he felt as though he was treading his adolescent dreams of glory and hero-worship into the fouled dust of the Wilno streets. His head stooped forward more than ever. He dragged his heavy boots. He felt stifled, and angry, and ashamed . . .

He felt he knew so well what was coming: a second interview in another dirty room; the memorizing of a grubby paper of futile instructions; some odious and puerile disguise; a trip by night across the Russian lines; a few days or weeks of stupid groping for some unimportant facts, which would be out of date and worthless long before he could get word of them to Kestner; finally discovery, the farce of a court-martial, and a shameful death by hanging — or, if he were lucky beyond the ordinary, facing the muskets of a file of infantry, back to a wall; death, solitary, unacknowledged, useless . . . And, even in the stifling heat of that summer evening, Adam shivered.

They turned the corner of the Market Square, and crossing it, dived into the gloom and smells of a small alley at its farther side. This alley was a *cul-de-sac*, its ends closed by a squat but massive two-storeyed house of stone, its door guarded by a sentinel. Kestner snapped out some password, and the soldier came to the salute. 'I will see you again

later this evening,' said the Alsatian, with his peculiar smile. 'In the mean while, wait here and drink a bottle of wine to "The Sacred Flies" with three of their number — three of your new comrades.'

Adam nodded mechanically. He could not trust himself to speak. The Alsatian sickened him physically, so that he could hardly bear to see the movement of his moist thin lips and the glint in his narrow eyes. Through the falling dusk Kestner peered at him closely. Perhaps Adam's features in some sort reflected the workings of his mind. In any event, the Alsatian suddenly laughed thinly, rather like the distant neighing of a horse, clapped him heartily on the shoulder, wheeled about, and, still chuckling audibly, retraced his steps towards the Market Square.

Adam looked after him with loathing. His sabre had been left in his uncle's billet, but he carried a small pistol in the pocket of his breeches, and for an instant he longed to yield to the impulse to drop the 'Alsatian jackal' in his tracks with a bullet through the back of his head, to abandon his dishonoured uniform, and disappear. . . . Suddenly he became conscious of the sentry behind him, still standing rigid, and from somewhere in the distance came the strains of the band of some regiment, playing the 'Sambre et Meuse' as it marched in.

Seeing that the Alsatian was out of hearing, and that his companion wore nothing more exalted than the uniform of a cavalry trooper, the sentry relaxed his machine-like precision, grounded his musket, and became conversational.

'That heartens a man, that does,' he said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the music. 'I've heard those tunes in Madrid, Vienna, and Berlin, comrade, and I don't doubt to hear them in Moscow. And that'll be a day worth living to see!'

He grinned and twirled a large grizzled moustache.

Adam Konski brought his hand empty out of his pocket. 'By God, yes!' he said explosively; ran past the astonished grenadier, up three stone steps, pushed open the heavy door, and entered the house.

The hall was dimly lit by a couple of lanterns of wrought iron. Adam found himself at the bottom of a short stone staircase. At the top of it a door stood wide, opening into a lighted room. From this room there came the sound of a soft tenor voice, singing some old French love-song.

Closing the street door behind him, Adam walked up the staircase, and, pausing on the threshold to tighten his fluttering nerves, moisten his dry lips, and choke down the lump in his throat, went into the room. What he had expected he hardly knew. What he saw was a long table, spread with a simple

meal, four glasses, and two bottles of wine. On the end farthest from him sat a young officer in the uniform of the dragoons, who continued to sing his pleasant little song, paying no heed at all to Adam's entrance. Behind the table two long windows glimmered against the dying light of the summer evening. In the embrasure of one of them sat two more officers; one in the green tunic of the Chasseurs of the Guard; the other in the light blue and silver of a hussar regiment. They were sitting very close together, talking earnestly in lowered voices.

Adam stood in the doorway unnoticed and shifted his feet. Then he coughed — deliberately, noisily, and nervously. The singer remained perfectly unconcerned, but the couple in the window looked up and rose to their feet.

'I am Adam Konski,' stammered Adam uncomfortably. 'I believe I am to be your comrade.' And in his heart he cursed his lack of self-possession and the inadequacy of words.

However, his embarrassment had reached its appointed end, for the taller of the two officers in the window embrasure hastened around the table and grasped his hand warmly.

'We expected you,' he said. And even in the confusion of this first meeting, Adam noticed his astonishing good looks, and thrilled absurdly to the

firm clasp of his hand. 'Let me present you! I am Charles Auric. In the window you see my dearest friend, Guy Frontenac. While the unmannered scoundrel who sits there, making the night hideous with his caterwaulings, is Philippe Lauzun. Stand up and shake hands, Philippe, you incredible hog!'

Lauzun turned round and grinned charmingly.

'Forgive me,' he begged. 'Pity an artist in the company of such Philistines who cannot even appreciate a song — a love-song!'

He made a comical gesture of despair and jumped off the table. In the background Frontenac murmured 'Enchanté' in a low voice, and sat down again. Even in that dim light Adam could see that Auric's friend, most rarely for a soldier of those days, was clean-shaven. His silhouette, clean-cut against the window as though slashed with a pair of scissors, was proud and fine. But on his feet he had stood little higher than Auric's chin. Obviously a mere boy . . . but there were many such boys in the long columns that wound across Europe to speak with the enemy in the gates of Moscow.

Charles noticed Adam's stare and clapped him gaily on the shoulder.

'You think he is too young!' he cried. 'What did I tell you, Guy? But he would come. I could not prevent him. And as he insisted, I arranged for him

to serve with "The Sacred Flies." Here he is in my care and must behave himself, eh, Guy?'

The young hussar nodded, smiling. His teeth were very small, regular, and pointed.

'And now,' continued Charles, 'we will eat; and drink to our mission — the success of the campaign! In a year, my friends, we shall be drinking good wine in Paris — not bad wine in a Lithuanian hovel! And we will be covered with glory and decorations.'

He laughed loudly, thrust Adam into a chair, and began to pour out the wine. Lauzun seized a hunch of black bread, and with it pounded the table, humming the air of the 'Chant du Départ.' Frontenac sat down opposite them, throwing back his embroidered dolman.

'Ah!' sighed Charles, putting down the glass he had just drained. 'It's poor stuff, but it serves, till we can tap His Muscovite Majesty's cellars in the Kremlin!' He turned to Adam. 'I will admit, monsieur, that, coming from Monsieur Kestner, you did not come well-sponsored! He lacks discrimination, that Alsatian, though not ability, God knows! But I am proud to meet one of your name!'

'My name?' repeated Adam.

'You are related to Ignatius Konski, I think,' said Lauzun.

Adam stiffened. 'My uncle,' he said curtly.

'Lucky devil!' cried Charles Auric. 'I give you his health.' He raised his glass, and Lauzun and Frontenac followed his example.

Adam deliberately put his glass down on the table. 'No,' he said.

Lauzun gasped.

'Why, the devil ——' began Charles. 'Are you mad?'

'No,' repeated Adam stubbornly, 'I hate him.'

Across the table he met the cool, straight glance of Frontenac's grey eyes, and felt a little ashamed. After all these were strangers, and the quarrel was a family one . . .

Charles emptied his glass, turned his chair, and leaned forward. 'A family feud, eh?' he said shrewdly. 'I see, my friend. I seek to know no more concerning it. But you must drink Colonel Konski's health. He may be a devilish unpleasant relation — but, by God! he's one of the finest soldiers in the Grand Army!'

Adam shrugged his shoulders. He wished to Heaven he had not taken such an instantaneous liking to Charles Auric. He longed to pick a quarrel. And most of all he was very conscious of Guy Frontenac sitting there quietly watching him . . .

Charles laughed merrily. 'Even if he thrashed

you daily with a crop, you shall drink his health,' he insisted. 'I was at Somo-Sierra, acting aide-de-camp to the Emperor. It was I who carried the order to Kozietulski to charge the Spanish battery commanding the gorge and the pass. You should have been there, Monsieur Konski! I have seen one or two battles in my career. But I swear to you that the carrying of the defile by your Polish cavalry was the finest exploit of light horse in the history of war. And Ignatius Konski was second man in among the guns! I saw him as he came back to report. His tunic was riddled with balls. His arm was bleeding. His face was black with smoke. The heron aigrette had been shot from his *czapka*, and one horse had been killed under him at the muzzles of the guns! The Emperor promoted him on the field. Krasinski himself swore that without Ignatius Konski he could never have carried his men up to the battery. I saw it, my friend. That gorge was like the mouth of hell! And that is why you'll drink your villainous uncle's health here and now!' And Charles put his hand on Adam's shoulder.

For an instant Adam sat motionless. The blood was throbbing in his ears. He could see it all clearly — the pass, the flaming barrier of cannon, the devoted squadron's furious ride into the smoke, and towering in their van the great figure of Ignatius,

sabre whirling, reins loose, his voice thundering curses, oaths, encouragement above the inferno of the battle, leading, almost wrenching, his men to the storm of the impregnable . . . and across the table he could see Guy Frontenac's eyes gleaming with the reflected passion and thrill of that superb charge.

He sprang up. 'I've been a cur!' he stammered. 'You're right, Auric! I'll drink his health — and the health of every soldier of Poland and of France!' He gulped down his wine furiously, so that he choked and coughed. Auric and Lauzun patted him on the back and shoulders, laughing.

'I think that was fine,' said Guy Frontenac. But Adam did not know whether he spoke of Somo-Sierra, of Ignatius, or of his own admission.

The ice thus broken, they made a merry meal. At last Charles Auric rose and stretched his long arms and legs. 'Kestner will be here soon,' he said. 'I'll see Guy to his quarters and be back in five minutes. Meantime Philippe no doubt will give you a singing lesson.' And with his usual infectious care-free laugh he buckled his sword-belt, put on his shako, took Guy Frontenac by the arm, and left the room.

As the street door banged, Adam turned abruptly. Philippe Lauzun was whistling.

'For God's sake, stop it!' cried Adam. 'Tell me — who is Frontenac?'

Lauzun continued to whistle, but one of his eyelids fluttered.

'Frontenac's a girl!' cried Adam. 'I saw when she shifted her dolman! Her voice and her face! What does it mean?'

Lauzun smiled. 'As an army,' he murmured, 'we are broad-minded. You heard what Charles said. She insisted. They love each other. He looks after her. For the rest one does not speak of it if one is wise.' He paused and tapped the hilt of his sabre which was lying across the table. 'Charles Auric is a good swordsman,' he went on. 'He excels with the duelling sword. You follow me?' And he began once more to whistle a plaintive little tune.

A few minutes later the door opened to admit Charles Auric with Kestner on his heels.

'And now, gentlemen, to business,' said the Alsatian curtly. 'I trust, Monsieur de Konski, you have come to know your new comrades to your mutual satisfaction?'

Adam nodded.

'And that you no longer find your mission quite so distasteful?' persisted Kestner.

'I am quite content,' replied Adam Konski.

But he looked at Charles Auric, not at Kestner,

while he spoke. And his thoughts were on that officer of 'The Sacred Flies' who was not present to receive the instructions delivered by the 'Alsatian jackal' on behalf of General Savary.

CHAPTER V

FOUR RIDE EAST

It was late before Adam Konski managed to sleep, the night of his enrollment in the ranks of 'The Sacred Flies.' That summer was hot even beyond the usual, and he lay, turning uneasily and sweating profusely on his hard narrow bed, wishing the town of Wilno and its inhabitants in the lowest deeps of hell. The night too was full of sound, for a belated corps was still marching in to the rattle of drums, the shrilling of fifes, and the raucous singing of its men.

But heat, noise, discomfort, formed merely a background to Adam's thoughts. These things were tiresome, but not absorbing. They were important in so far that they tended to depress his spirit and stimulate a natural morbidity. Consciously they affected him not at all. His mind was actively occupied in quite other directions.

He was not even thinking particularly of Kestner's final instructions. They had been too vague. And while he was encouraged and heartened to feel that his mission was not to be a solitary one, he was unable entirely to shake off his disappointment at

being thus compelled to exchange soldiering for spying; his squadron for 'The Sacred Flies.' The future could take care of itself . . . And Adam turning on his pillow for perhaps the seventh time, at last settled to contemplation of the almost invisible and entirely filthy ceiling above his head, while he deliberately allowed himself to revel in speculation concerning the mysterious Frontenac.

He was not particularly surprised by her presence. There were many women, wives and mistresses, acknowledged and unacknowledged, profligate and virtuous, in the mass of the Grand Army. Her presence was a commonplace of the period and circumstances. But why the uniform, the masculine disguise, the faked commission? Women rode openly in their lovers' or their husbands' carriages among the baggage train, often suckling their children with distressing freedom and complete absence of self-consciousness. Some insisted on their sex to the point of bearing children on the march, and even during the worst horrors of the Retreat . . .

In a way Adam was glad to think that she was not to trail behind the army in such company. In another way he shuddered at the idea of the girl accompanying himself and his comrades on their mission. She looked too heart-breakingly young to be thrusting her pretty head into such dangers,

thought Adam, with all the middle-aged superiority natural to his nineteen years. And he grew almost angry, wondering what the devil Charles Auric could have been thinking about . . .

He might have spared himself his indignation on such an intolerably sultry night. Charles Auric knew quite well what he was doing. He had not inherited his father's strong Breton blood and shrewd lawyer's brain for nothing. And, though he loved Diane, he was no sentimentalist. He loved with conviction rather than with emotion. His feelings were admirably regulated; his heart perfectly controlled by his head. And his natural charm and amiability more than compensated for any temperamental cold-bloodedness. Always gay, smiling, calm, and self-possessed, Charles knew himself on the verge of a great career. He had come to Poland from Spain to turn that possibility into certainty under the Emperor's eye.

His conquest of General Savary had been his first step. Charles, unlike Adam, was neither an aristocrat by birth, nor a young man of ideals. He was *homme du monde, homme d'affaires.* To him spying was neither disgraceful nor especially dangerous: merely a difficult and essential part of the business of war, which offered peculiar opportunities of distinction to its successful practitioners. As for Diane,

he preferred her continual company at his side to her enforced association with the other women of the army, who were naturally 'a mixed lot.' He knew the colonel of the Tenth Hussars well enough to be able to fix up the little matter of a uniform without difficulty. And finally, as he said frankly to Philippe Lauzun, he thought she would be safer with him, however perilous his mission, than trailing in the wake of the great battles without his protection. 'Besides,' he added, twisting his moustache meditatively, 'she might be very useful. We can always make a woman of her again.'

He said this so seriously that Lauzun laughed, and proceeded to whistle an improper Parisian song. Whereat Charles beat him violently in the ribs and doubled him up.

Lauzun was something of a character. Son of an *émigré* of '93, he had spent his teens in Coblentz in the company of fiery gentlemen of the old *noblesse*, swearing to lay revolutionary Paris in smoking ruins, and to hang, draw, and quarter Philippe Égalité in satisfaction for the murder of their King. Naturally languid, precociously intelligent, and something of a dandy, Philippe had observed with amusement these same fiery French nobles damning Frederick William and the Duke of Brunswick for 'odious Germans' and rejoicing over Valmy, before they realized

that the victory of their countrymen implied the defeat of their cause. He taught dancing for a living; soon abandoned it for music; almost starved in Munich for two years; and at last, realizing with a certain cynical satisfaction that a man must adapt himself to his circumstances if he wishes to live, returned to Paris, dropped the 'de' from before his surname, and enlisted as a trooper in a cavalry regiment. In 1812 he was a lieutenant of thirty, dark, sallow, and always very precise in his dress. He was alike free from ambition and from vices. But not even the most brutal attentions of his comrades in the dragoons had availed to cure him of his habit of whistling or humming at every opportunity. He had one curious failing, in that he was very proud of his hands, which were both large and ugly, and always gesticulated extravagantly in order to show them off.

Though at this stage, after his first meeting with them, Adam could not know it, of his new comrades Auric and Lauzun were the complex characters, Diane the simple, straightforward one. Charles combined the lover, the soldier, and the 'climber'; and would have admitted to the combination any day with a laugh. Lauzun mingled all the qualities of the man who observes life rather than lives it — not so much from choice, as from absence of positive

character. Music, clothes, his hands — these things he loved with such love as he was capable of. And he, too, would have admitted — but less gaily than Charles — that none of these three was likely to be improved by participation in the invasion of Russia.

Diane, on the other hand, with all the limited practicality of her sex, knew perfectly well where she was, and why. She loved Charles Auric. She had loved him from the first moment she had seen him. If fortune and Napoleon sent him to Russia, French logic bade her follow. And her purpose was not likely to be weakened by the American strain in her blood. Her Puritan forbears had left England for a New World because they held freedom of thought higher than discomfort and danger. Diane, being a woman, believed that the company of Charles Auric was a greater thing than all the freedom of thought in the world. . . .

To Adam, as he lay sleepless, puzzling it out, this motive of hers, this overwhelming love for Charles, gradually became clear. Simple enough to her, to Adam it seemed a very different story. He could not see it as a commonplace logical sequence of normal affection. He did not want to. He knew nothing of women, and accordingly had made enhaloed pictures of them for the walls of his mind, after the immemorial custom of youth. The grimy

unlovely peasants of the Konski estate could not be considered from that point of view. And since Wanda's death there had been no other woman in his father's house. Women, therefore, to young Adam, still meant Beauty and Romance, at that moment when he first set eyes on Diane 'Frontenac.' Was it so surprising that he forthwith raised her to occupy the pedestal which stood empty and waiting in his imagination? She was young and lovely. She was on her way, disguised and under a false name, to take part in the greatest war the world had so far witnessed. To Adam she seemed already encircled with Romance. And in the glamour of that realization all that was sordid in the duty of 'The Sacred Flies' faded to nothingness. That duty was to include Diane. It was enough.

And Adam Konski, feeling in some obscure way happier than he had been for years, turned over once more and fell asleep, just as the first grey light of dawn peered in at him through the dirty windows of his room.

The following night in Wilno a ball was held, given by the notables of the town in the Emperor's honour. It was hotter than ever in the streets, and overhead the sky flared with sheets of summer lightning. At present in the Lithuanian capital the rain held

off, though from the south and west already came dispatches that told of soggy roads, delayed rations, and marches ominously behind schedule. The prolonged heat and unusually heavy rains of that summer did as much to destroy the Grand Army as the snow that caused the final catastrophe.

Not that any dreamed that night of disaster. Indeed, it appeared rather that for a few hours the war had been forgotten. That at least was the thought in Adam Konski's mind, as he and his three companions drew rein outside the Palace on their way to the eastern gate of the city. Those tall lighted windows, open to the summer night, through which came the soft melody of dance music, had given the little band of adventurers common pause. All alike were suddenly very conscious of their isolation. They were riding out on their perilous duty — and behind them their leaders danced and flirted under the great chandeliers in all the bravery of full-dress uniforms.

Beside him Adam heard Diane draw her breath sharply. 'Oh, if we could only go in and dance once!' she sighed.

Lauzun, of course, was humming the tune.

'They'll be damnably hot before morning!' laughed Charles.

Adam said nothing. He was thinking, like most

young men at one time or another, that dance music, when one is not dancing to it, is the most insidiously melancholy thing in the world.

The music broke off suddenly, giving place to the rattle and jingle of cavalry and the rumble of wheels. Auric's hand went up to the salute, and as Adam followed his example, he saw a squadron of light horse in two bodies wheel into lines at the Palace gates, and a heavy travelling-coach drive between them. It was a squadron from his own regiment on escort duty with the Emperor, in all the splendour of the white parade uniforms with crimson *revers*; the officers with silver sashes, tall heron's plumes in their *czapkas*, leopard-skins over crimson saddle-cloths embroidered in silver with the Imperial *N* and the white eagle of Poland. Torchlight glinted back from sword-hilts and spurs, badges and epaulettes.

Adam had a momentary glimpse of a short, stout figure in a dark coat, white breeches, and buckled shoes, walking with short aggressive paces up the few stone steps to the wide-flung Palace doors; a second of Ignatius Konski, sitting his horse by the door of the carriage, stiff as a ramrod, huge, arrogant, stupid, and magnificent. The band broke out again with 'Veillons au Salut de l'Empire,' and Charles Auric's hand dropped to his side. '*En avant!*' he cried, and put spurs to his horse.

So those four of 'The Sacred Flies' clattered past the lighted Palace windows — where for the moment all gaiety had ceased while the Emperor went moodily from group to group — and made their way towards the eastern gate and the Świzcany way, leading towards Moscow. Charles thought of his promotion, and Diane of Charles. Lauzun hummed Queen Hortense's song to his horse's hoof-beats. But Adam looked back over his shoulder for one last glance at the white tunics, the plumes, and the glitter of *his* regiment, and the Palace where *his* Emperor was now brooding over the gloomy dispatches from his brother Jerome in the South. And then he looked sideways at Diane riding beside him, feeling strangely sad, and at the same time equally strangely elated. For it was Diane who was making possible his service in 'The Sacred Flies.' And by that service he was proving his right to the uniform of the regiment whose commission he held. Perhaps one day — and again he looked sideways at Diane, with that queer warmth in his heart — perhaps one day Diane would see him, Adam Konski, in the white parade uniform of the Polish Light Horse, at the head of the Emperor's escort! And for the first time it came into his mind to wonder if the girl was Auric's wife, or only his mistress.

CHAPTER VI

THE STRANGE HOUSE

During the days that followed, while Napoleon waited in Wilno before resuming the advance, Auric and Diane, Lauzun and Adam Konski rode away to the south and east. They were all in uniform — for their plan and their orders were that they should join the Russians as deserters from the Grand Army. They travelled away from the main Moscow road because they aimed to fall in with the army of Bagration, notorious for his sympathy with French royalists, rather than with that of Barclay de Tolly. The latter, commanding the northern of the two Russian armies, was well known to loathe all Frenchmen impartially. Therefore the little band of 'Sacred Flies' aimed at effecting a peaceful junction with Bagration's patrols somewhere on the latter's line of retreat towards his junction with Barclay. Charles Auric, who of course commanded the party, had chosen a little village marked on his very inadquate staff-map as Rakitki, lying almost exactly due south of Smolensk, for his first objective. After that, laughed Charles, they must trust to Providence, luck, and their wits.

The ride out of Wilno by night was part of Kestner's original plan. He did not believe in broadcasting plans of secret service. And once beyond the city gates Charles was expected to play the game to its last ounce, and dodge advance French patrols as carefully as though they were Russians — to behave, in short, as if he and his companions were deserters in fact as well as fiction. Unpleasant personality though he was, the Alsation knew his job.

So, for that matter, did Charles Auric. The first stage of the adventure was safely accomplished under cover of darkness. And daybreak found the four well outside the zone of both armies. Charles had driven them hard, sparing neither Diane nor the horses. He himself led the way, keen-eyed, untiring, strong and yet supple in his saddle like a steel blade. For the moment it seemed as if his gaiety, that blade's ornamented scabbard, had been left behind in Wilno. He did not speak, except to give an order, to encourage Diane, or to debate some point with Lauzun. He did not even turn his head. He rode forward implacably, as though the limitless horizon were his goal. Lauzun hummed no longer. He only opened his lips to abuse the sudden change in the weather. They had left the gathering thunder-storm behind them, but some eight miles out of Wilno they ran into a steady downpour and

the first autumn cold, so that they were all grateful for their big white cavalry cloaks. Diane, though colder and hungrier than she would have believed it possible to be, rode steadily on, with her eyes fixed on her husband's slim straight back, as though it were a magnet to draw her on, and also a charm to exorcise the devils of weariness and discomfort that possessed her. Last of all came Adam Konski. He alone was still warm with the thrill of adventure; and he alone was making much of his horse.

That tall grey stallion, sired by an English hunter from an Arab mare of Jan Konski's, was Adam's only remaining link with his youth and the castle of Konski. Of uncertain temper, but with great speed and endurance, Nimrod, as Adam had named him, was his proudest possession, and almost his dearest friend. And Nimrod, as always, was hating the rain. Diane, looking, for an instant over her shoulder, saw Adam lying along the horse's neck, whispering nonsense words of affection into his ear. She laughed. Adam flushed. And she laughed still more, only to break off abruptly, biting her lips, and looking a little scared.

She checked her mount so that Adam rode level with her. 'It's too big,' she said, and her voice was hardly more than a whisper. 'Don't you feel it as something uncanny? All this space of empty

plains? It is like laughing in a cathedral!' She shivered and drew her cloak more closely about her.

Adam nodded, and peered about him through the thin drifting sheets of rain. On every side of them lay the vast flats of that great Central European plain which stretches from the Baltic Sea and the Carpathians to the Urals. Here and there lay clumps of woodland — pine, birch, and beech trees — strangely even in height and regular in outline, serving only to augment the impression of vast and monotonous spaces by giving the eye fixed points by which to measure. Under the cold rain the sandy soil sogged and splashed muddily about the horse's hoofs. Overhead the sky lay dark and grey, monotonous as the deadly sameness of the plains. And all was lifeless and silent, save for the splashing footfalls of the horses and the hardly perceptible hissing of the rain upon the little cavalcade. Upon all save Charles Auric — to whom rain and plains were equally parts of the day's work — fell depression of spirit and a feeling of isolation akin to panic. They might have been riding through a dead world, or across one of the empty circles of Hell. They felt inconceivably small, remote, and unimportant. It would have been impossible to believe that other men could inhabit such spaces of desolation, had it

not been for the wooden bridges spanning the streams that continually ran athwart their road.

Before midday they found shelter in a miserable farm by the roadside: shelter, and no more, for the place was empty, and they had to light their own fire and make a meal from the provisions they carried in their haversacks. Warmth and food reminded all of them alike that they were a night short of sleep. Diane, indeed, nodded over the table, till Charles forced some cognac down her throat, bringing colour back to her cheeks and making her cough and splutter.

'A few hours' sleep won't hurt us, or the horses,' he said, spreading his cloak out on the rough floor for his wife. 'But we must keep guard. I'll stand sentry.'

Lauzun jumped up. 'No, no, my dear fellow,' he said, 'I can't allow that. Honestly, I prefer to rest on my feet.' He made one of his typical affected gestures towards the dirty floor of the room, glancing downwards under eyebrows a trifle lifted. 'Really, Charles! I'd as soon sleep on a dung-hill, and have done with it!'

Adam could not help smiling. Charles nodded abruptly, and stretched himself out beside Diane on the big cloak. The girl had already turned a little on one side, curled up a little like a tired cat, and

gone as peacefully to sleep as if she were in Boston or Paris rather than the wilds of Russia.

'You see,' whispered Lauzun, putting a hand on Adam's shoulder, 'that's good campaigning common sense! Charles wants sleep as badly as any of us. So he took the opportunity I gave him. Follow his example, young man. You're much too weary to dispute with me for a singularly dreary duty!' And he went over to the doorway, where he stood watching the road, leaning against the open door with a certain elegance of attitude, and playing with the little silver snuff-box he always carried.

Adam sat down thankfully enough in a rough wooden armchair, and stared sleepily into the fire. It all seemed so unreal, so static. No danger, no fighting — just rain outside and firelight playing on the bare walls of an empty room — and Auric and Frontenac sleeping quietly, while Lauzun yawned in the doorway. And this was the great adventure of war! Just acute weariness, so great as to make the extreme of discomfort unimportant! And more than anything else he felt shatteringly disappointed . . . He blinked more and more. The fire seemed to waver, grow bigger and bigger, and dissolve. He felt the hilt of his sabre bruising his ribs, and made a futile effort to shift it with his left hand. His head tilted back a little into the

corner of the chair, and his mouth opened. He snored . . .

How long he slept he had no idea. But he awoke with a start to find Lauzun twisting his wrist savagely.

'What the devil ——' spluttered Adam furiously.

'I thought I should never get you roused,' said Lauzun calmly. 'We've got to move in a hurry! Charles and Frontenac are saddling up now!'

Adam lurched to his feet. He felt horribly stiff and extremely out of temper. He followed Lauzun to the doorway just as Charles and Diane led the four horses round from the tumbledown outhouse where they had been stabled.

'You were right, Philippe!' said Charles abruptly, swinging into his saddle. 'They're some of Platoff's Cossacks — that means Barclay's army. We must show them our heels, if we can!'

And, as they all mounted, Adam could see a scattered detachment of riders with lances approaching rapidly about half a mile away.

'Have they seen us, Charles?' asked Lauzun.

Auric frowned. 'My fault,' he snapped. 'I forgot the smoke of our fire. They must have known the place was deserted, and come to investigate! Lucky for us all that you can use your eyes, Philippe, and that I carry this!' He showed a short field-glass, of

the type always carried by the Emperor, before clicking it together and slipping it into a holster.

They broke into a steady canter, Lauzun leading, then Diane, with Adam and Auric bringing up the rear. For perhaps quarter of an hour they rode steadily in silence. Then Adam noticed that Auric began to glance over his shoulder at shorter and shorter intervals.

'We can't risk foundering our brutes,' he muttered. 'Can you use a sabre?' he rapped out at Adam.

Adam Konski flushed and did not answer. Once again Charles turned in his saddle. His blue eyes seemed to harden and sparkle.

A hundred yards ahead of them the track turned sharply to round the corner of a little coppice of beeches. Charles spurred up to Lauzun, led his companions round the bend, and then off the track into the cover of the trees.

'They're only seven in all,' he said rapidly. 'We must fight! Philippe, you come with me! Konski will stay with Frontenac.'

'Oh, no!' said Diane.

'Obey orders!' snapped Charles. 'Ready, Philippe?'

Lauzun smiled. He was wiping mud-splashes off his high boots with a lace-edged handkerchief.

Charles Auric drew his sabre and placed it carefully between his teeth; pulled two pistols from his holsters and dropped the reins on his charger's neck. For a moment there came utter and complete silence. Adam glanced at Charles. It was not surprising that a woman should love him, he thought: there was something magnificently virile and capable in the lean brown face with its sparkling blue eyes, and the small elegantly curved moustache above the hard line of the steel blade; in his slim strong body so easily balanced on the fretting charger, and the firm hands clenched on the pistol butts; in the keen intense expectancy, the obvious spirit, courage, and leadership of the man.

The first sounds of the Russians approaching came to their ears, and, almost before Adam realized their significance, Charles, with Lauzun at his elbow, half rose in his stirrups, drove in his spurs, and rode at full speed round the corner of the coppice. Irresistibly drawn after them, Adam and the girl followed. They came out onto the road just in time to see Charles and Lauzun crash into the enemy.

The Cossacks, strung out unevenly according to the varying pace of their horses, and surprised by the sudden onslaught of their quarry, were in no case to meet the attack. Their leading file made a half-hearted attempt to turn. Adam saw two flashes

blaze from Auric's pistols. One man and one horse went down. The fallen horse's rider took one of the empty pistols full in the face. And then Charles ripped the sabre from his teeth and crashed in with the steel. It was four against two, for Lauzun also had dropped a Cossack with his pistol. The jarring slither and parrying of sword-blades came faintly down the wind to where Adam and Diane watched and waited.

Suddenly the girl drew a sharp breath and shook her reins. Her horse started forward, but Nimrod was quicker on his feet, and Adam managed to lean over and catch her bridle.

'How can you?' she flared. 'It's two to one! We must go in! Are you afraid?'

The words lashed Adam like the cut of a whip. 'Auric ordered us ——' he began.

'Oh, let me go!' interrupted the girl savagely. 'You can do as you please!' She struck her horse smartly with the riding-whip she carried from a thong at her wrist, and the two chargers passaged wildly across the road.

'My God! Look!' cried Diane.

Adam turned his head. He had a brief glimpse of the mêlée, and thought he saw Charles reel in his saddle. Then he felt a violent pain in his right wrist. Diane had slashed at the hand on her reins

with her whip. He let go with an oath, and the next moment had launched Nimrod in furious pursuit.

But he was to have no leisure for the chase of headstrong beauty. He had not been mistaken in his brief glimpse of the fight. Charles Auric was down, and Lauzun hard pressed by the two surviving Cossacks. The girl swerved to go to where Charles lay on the ground, bleeding from a lance-thrust. Adam enjoyed a moment of mad exhilaration: he heard the wind whistle past the blade as he drew sabre; he saw the rutted earth whirling past under Nimrod's flying hoofs, and the grimy sheepskin and hideous whiskered face of a Cossack between Nimrod's ears. Next instant he automatically parried the darting thrust of a lance, turned his blade over, and cut upward hard and clean. Nimrod reared up on his hind legs, snorting foam, and pawing madly with his forelegs, as the Cossack went down heavily like a dropped sack under the lashing hoofs.

'Bravo!' yelled Lauzun. And Adam realized that he was still alive, and that he had killed his first man. Blood was trickling over the hilt of his sabre and staining his hand. For a moment he felt deathly, horribly sick. He shut his eyes, clutching at the pommel of his saddle. When he opened them again,

Lauzun was gripping his hand. The skirmish was over. The two surviving Russians had broken off the combat and fled while they might.

'You saved our bacon!' said Lauzun warmly. 'I'm afraid Charles is badly hurt.'

He and Adam dismounted and walked quickly to where Charles Auric lay across his wife's knees, the right side of his uniform dreadfully stained and splotched with blood and mud. He had taken a lance-point through his right shoulder.

'Damned careless of me — bungled my parry!' he whispered through grey lips as Lauzun stooped over him.

'And what now?' asked Adam.

The girl, who had opened Charles's tunic, and was cutting two long strips from the sleeve of his shirt to serve as a bandage, jerked her head irritably. 'Surely you will wait for orders,' she said sarcastically. 'Responsibility, like fighting, has its risks!'

Adam winced. 'Mademoiselle ——' he began hotly.

'*Madame* — if you please,' she corrected him coldly. 'Though I should have thought it would have been in better taste to have respected the sex I assumed with my uniform.'

Lauzun stared a little helplessly.

'Get me onto a horse again,' grunted Charles.

'My God! Is this a time and place for a quarrel about manners? Diane, I'm ashamed of you!'

'If he hadn't held me back and played the coward,' burst out the girl almost hysterically, 'you would never have been hurt!' Charles stifled a cry of pain as Lauzun helped him to his feet. 'Adam was perfectly right,' he said, and held out his left hand with a gallant effort to twist his lips into his usual smile. 'Can you make out where we are on the map?' he said to Lauzun.

Diane bit her lip. She was very near to tears, and at that moment terrifyingly lonely, with only these three young men, who stood by each other with this damnable masculine loyalty which a woman finds it so hard even to understand, and consequently to forgive. . . . None of them was even looking at her. Charles, obviously in great pain, was leaning heavily on Lauzun's shoulder, his eyes closed, his right arm hanging limp and useless. Adam Konski had taken the map, unrolled it across Nimrod's saddle, and was studying it with acute concentration. Diane felt slighted, useless, and miserable. She hated Adam Konski, she decided, more than she could have believed it possible to hate any one in the world. . . .

'Thank God, the last of those devils ran!' muttered Lauzun. 'My flask — quickly!' He stretched

out an urgent hand, and Diane choked down her indignation of wounded pride and hurried to rummage for the flask of cognac in Lauzun's saddle-bag. Charles Auric's head had fallen forward on his chest. He was on the point of fainting when the brandy was forced between his teeth.

'We must get him under a roof,' said Lauzun. 'Shall we go back to that farm?'

Adam looked from the map. 'Too dangerous,' he said curtly. 'There seems to be some sort of village that can't be far along this road. I think we must gamble on its being deserted also. If we go back we're bound to be trapped — at least that's my opinion.'

Lauzun nodded.

'Yes, yes,' whispered Charles. 'We must go on — or you must! I shall have to take my chance!'

The next few hours were one long agony — of pain for the wounded man, of torturing anxiety for his companions. Adam and Lauzun hoisted him onto his charger with infinite care, which was yet not enough to save him from frightful stabs of pain. Diane on Charles's left, his left arm round her neck, and Lauzun on his right, his left arm round Charles's waist, rode on each side of him, holding him firm in his saddle, the three horses, closely bunched together, plodding forward at a walk that seemed to

make a snail's progress across the illimitable plains. Behind them Adam Konski covered the rear of the melancholy cavalcade, expecting every moment to find another Russian patrol upon their heels. Diane's bitter words rankled in his heart. Not even Lauzun's warm grip of his hand, and Auric's praise, availed to counter the recollection of the girl's angry and contemptuous eyes. He began to wonder if he had held back from no other motive than obedience to orders. . . .

The track ran on and on. The rain began to fall again. The sky darkened with the promise of dusk. There was no sign of the village. Adam stood in his stirrups and gazed desperately round the horizon. But nothing loomed through the rain but the scattered patches of woodland and the deadly monotony of the rolling plains.

'I suppose we must bivouac in the shelter of the trees somewhere,' called Lauzun. 'Charles is all in!'

Adam nodded grimly. The outlook was dark, indeed. They left the track and plodded into the cover of the nearest trees. But there was no shelter there. The ground was sodden, and the rain fell remorselessly, dripping through the soaked branches overhead. They rode on with the persistence of despair till at last they emerged on the further side of the woodland belt. Then with one accord they reined

in. Away to their right, standing like some fantastic piece of cardboard scenery in the midst of the plains, lay a long grey wall with a house behind it: a strange stone house that seemed as if there might be no depth of rooms behind its frontage, ornamented with curious minarets and towers. It gave the impression of a madman's dream, of a sham Scottish castle. Anywhere else it would have looked absurd. To Adam and his companions, staring at it through the downpour, it looked insane — unreal, but terrifying.

'Look!' said Adam and pointed.

Smoke, driven low by the rising wind, was eddying from a square stone chimney about the central tower.

Suddenly Auric writhed horribly. 'Get me to that fire!' he jerked out. 'I — I can't stand this any longer!'

Lauzun looked round at Adam. For an instant the latter hesitated. If the house was occupied, it was any odds that it was in the possession of a Russian detachment. And it was occupied. The smoke proved it. And then Diane in her turn looked round. She did not speak, and there was infinite terror and despair upon her face. But to Adam it was as though once more she was throwing the taunt of cowardice in his teeth.

'I'll go ahead and reconnoitre,' he said abruptly, riding up to Diane's elbow.

She put a hand on his sleeve. 'Forgive me, Adam?' she said, smiling rather pitifully.

He could not trust himself to speak. He just touched her glove with his lips, and cantered off across the darkening plain.

CHAPTER VII

THE SPIDER

THE house that sprawled so strangely across the desolate Russian plain had a history sufficiently curious. In the archives of the government of Smolensk lay some musty parchment, which gave its name as Seidenbrod, and proclaimed it as the property — by special deed of gift from the Tsar Peter I — of a certain Prince Geraldin. That its owner's was not a Muscovite name was obvious. That in the mouth of the few local peasantry it was always spoken of as 'The Madman's House' was more than a little sinister. But to any curious inquirer, the bald and scented official in charge of the archives would — and indeed could — have given no reply more illuminating than his invariable shrug. He did not know. He was not interested, admittedly . . . But he did not know . . . it did not matter . . .

In 1812 it certainly did not matter. People, and even governments, had other things to remember and think of than that odd Irish gentleman John Geraldine, who had once entered the service of the Great Peter with, for capital, only a sword and a giant wolf-hound. Yet in his day John Geraldine

was a sufficiently notable figure. Like so many of his race, he made a superb soldier of fortune; for he was a fine swordsman, and not even the Tsar Peter himself could drink him to a standstill or under a table. He rose rapidly in the Russian service, and put the climax to his career at Pultava by saving Peter's life from a death-ride of maddened Swedish dragoons. He was rewarded with a colonelcy, a title, and the grant of the land on which stood the small village of Seidenbrod. For Geraldine, with memories of certain Connemara lands which were his rightful inheritance, had asked especially for a country domain, where he meant once more to live like an Irish gentleman.

Unhappily there had always been a streak of eccentricity akin to madness latent in the family. In John Geraldine it had been dormant through hard years of exile and war. But in Prince Ivan Geraldin the lurking beast crept out at last, and struck the more cruelly for its long repression. The man who had been no more than brave, reckless, and quarrelsome to a fault, became suddenly subject to intermittent attacks of sheer lunacy. It was whispered that in one of these mad fits he had struck his young Russian wife so brutally that she died. In another he had had Seidenbrod levelled with the ground, and the inhabitants transported to Smolensk, so that on

the empty site he might build the monstrous edifice in stone which was to be known as 'The Madman's House.' Finally he rode out blindly one night into a blizzard on his favourite mare, and perished raving and alone, leaving to a son of three the fantastic house that he had built, and the further legacy of his tainted blood. Of such sort was the history, interwoven no doubt of hard fact and sombre legend, of Prince Ivan Geraldin, and 'The Madman's House.'

Adam Konski, of course, was supremely ignorant of the history of the strange house, and of the man who had built it. But, as he rode towards the long frowning wall through the dusk, it could have made little difference even if he had known the most revolting details of the legend. For shelter in some form had to be found, and quickly! Nothing, however sinister or ill-omened, could compare with the possibility of a night spent in the open under the rain. . . . Adam thought of Charles with his wounded shoulder, of the pinched desperate look on Diane's face, and set his teeth.

He was close under the wall now. Low though it had seemed at a distance it loomed tremendous and overpowering over his head against the darkening sky. Adam dismounted. A single great door broke the implacable frontage of the wall, which other-

wise was not pierced at any point, not even by imitation mediæval loopholes. Above the door hung a lantern of carved iron, creaking a little as it hung from its rusty chain. But it was unlighted. There was no sign of bell or knocker, or sliding panel: merely a rough wooden surface, studded with square knobs of iron. And all about Adam, as he stood, staring rather helplessly, the rain hissed gently into the grass and trickled drearily in long serpentine rivulets down the uneven stones of the wall.

With a muttered oath he drew his sabre and beat with the hilt upon the door, feeling utterly and most humiliatingly ineffective. Thrice and four times he struck, and then stood back to wait. Nothing happened. He cupped his mouth between his hands and shouted. But the yell seemed to die as it left his lips to the feeble wailing of a lost child. Again he cursed, and again he fell to a frantic battering on the unresponsive door. For Adam had seen at a glance that even he, who could climb like a cat, could find no foothold to scale the wall, let alone a woman and a wounded man . . .

He was still shouting and thudding on the door in that frenzy of futile exasperation which forbids the acknowledgment of defeat, when he heard behind him the squelching, laboured paces of his companions. Adam turned to face them, angry

and miserable. But to excuse his failure seemed as futile as his efforts to achieve an entrance had been. Charles Auric had fainted as they had got him off his horse. Diane and Philippe Lauzun supported his limp body and trailing legs between them. In the background the horses had clustered together for mutual comfort, their tails turned to the rain, their heads drooping miserably towards the sodden grass.

'We should have asked Kestner for a battery!' muttered Adam bitterly. 'What in God's name can we do?'

They stared silently at each other's mud-streaked, haggard faces. The situation was beyond words. And then, as if in deliberately slow and sardonic answer to Adam's question, came the grinding jar of rusty bolts being drawn, and the rattle of chains being unfastened.

Adam spun around. The great door opened with the ponderous unreality of a nightmare. The slowly widening opening revealed a bent and white-haired old man, clad in black from head to foot, who tugged at the door with all his force. Adam noticed that he wore polished silver buttons on his coat and silver buckles on his shoes. But suddenly the door began to swing back easily, and he took no more heed of the old man.

Standing in the doorway, a torch flaring in each hand, stood a woman. Rather above middle height, she was dressed in a long robe of crimson velvet, girdled close beneath her breasts with a golden cord. At her throat, hung by a black ribbon, was a small silver crucifix. In the flickering torchlight she seemed more like a figure cut from an illuminated missal than a living woman. And this effect of unreality was increased by the complete absence of any expression upon a face undeniably lovely. Her head rose superbly above a delicately curving throat. The chin was firm, the forehead smooth and wide, crowned with gleaming jet-black hair. But for all her beauty, this woman's face was a mask. The splendidly curved lips were painted. The eyebrows had been carefully plucked into two thin black lines curving up a little as they ran inwards to meet the short classical nose. And these pencilled brows combined with a delicate tinting of the eyelids to give a curious triangular effect to the setting of the magnificent black eyes.

She looked at the bedraggled adventurers without a gleam of interest, and said nothing. For a moment Adam Konski also stood dumb and motionless, fascinated by her sudden appearance, her bizarre beauty, and the play of the shadows on her face. Then he glanced at his companions. Lauzun was

smiling foolishly. But Diane — and this served to bring Adam back to reality once more — was altogether intent upon tightening the bandage which was stained with her husband's blood.

Hurriedly, and in stumbling Russian, Adam pointed out their situation, and begged for shelter.

'You are Russian?' she asked, when he had finished. And she spoke in French. Adam started.

'No — madame,' he said hesitating. He could not see whether the long white fingers, that held the torches so still, were ringed or not. 'We are four French officers.'

She bent her head slightly, as if in acknowledgment. 'You are — of "The Sacred Flies"?' she asked abruptly.

'Mon Dieu, madame!' interrupted Lauzun roughly, 'may we not talk under shelter? For if you will not shelter Frenchmen willingly, we must enter your house by force!' And Adam saw there was a cocked pistol in his hand.

The woman, too, saw the weapon, but she did not move. 'You are — of "The Sacred Flies"?' she repeated. Her voice was soft and very compelling, like wind through poplars on a May evening.

Lauzun lifted his pistol, but Adam stepped quickly in front of him. 'We are of "The Sacred Flies,"' he said.

The woman lowered her torches. 'Then you are very welcome,' she said. 'Follow me, and leave your horses with the servants.' And, turning slowly, she led the way through an archway that was almost a tunnel.

The little band of adventurers followed, limping and stumbling on their unfamiliar way in the uncertain light. And, glancing back over his shoulder, Adam saw three more bent elderly men in black appear from the shadows and go to the horses' heads. He noticed also now that all these unusual servants wore small-swords at their sides.

But between weariness, soaking clothes, and acute anxiety for Charles Auric, lying a dead weight between the supporting shoulders of his wife and Philippe Lauzun, none of them could muster up more than a vaguely apprehensive wonder at their new surroundings. They had found shelter. Presumably they could expect soon to find food and wine, fire and beds. For the moment it was enough . . .

Leaving the shelter of the tunnelled archway, with its uneven flagstone and dank sweating walls along which their horses' hoofs rang and echoed weirdly, they came out into a small walled courtyard. For a moment the woman stopped, while the torches spluttered and flared fantastically under the rain, throwing up, like some incredible phantom in front

of them, the looming bulk of the strange house, with its long unlighted windows staring like empty sockets in a tall pile of skulls. 'The horses to the stables — quickly!' she ordered. 'And bring food and wine to the library.'

Servants and horses vanished into the darkness. The woman went on across the courtyard, up five stone steps, guarded by unimaginable heraldic beasts, and through an open door into a great stone hall. This hall was divided in two by pseudo-Gothic arches, and lighted by torches in sconces along the walls. It rose above their heads the whole height of the house, and smelled of incense. It was like a vault that was too big to be real.

The woman seemed supremely indifferent as to whether her unbidden guests followed her or not. Nor did she appear to notice that Charles Auric had collapsed, and that his companions were encumbered accordingly. She crossed the hall to a low curtained door at its farthest end, opened it with a key, and passed through, thrusting the torches she carried carelessly into sconces on either side of it. When the others in their turn crossed the curtained threshold, they found her standing before a huge log-fire, delicately warming her hands.

This room was long and low. It was furnished orientally with wide cushioned divans, spread with

Persian rugs and glowing Eastern silks. The walls were hung with tapestry picturing forgotten battles of the sixteenth century. A heavy sickly perfume scented the warm air. Above the wide fireplace stood several magnificent specimens of Chinese porcelain. In his collecting fits of madness Prince Geraldin had shown a considerable method.

Adam and Lauzun lowered Charles Auric gently onto one of the divans, and Philippe proceeded methodically to rebandage the wounded shoulder. Diane sank exhausted and trembling onto a leopard-skin by the fire. The lady in crimson velvet continued quietly to warm her hands. In this hot, scented room the outside world of cold and rain and dreary, illimitable plains might never have existed. Adam Konski shut his eyes, and stood swaying on his feet. He was beginning to realize how utterly, completely, and damnably tired he was. Dissolving chaotic colours spun in circles before him . . .

The woman must have turned sharply, for he found one arm suddenly grasped firmly by very muscular fingers, and he opened his eyes again to find her standing almost against him.

'Sit down!' she said coldly. 'Sit still, all of you, and warm yourselves! Then you shall eat and drink — and we will talk.'

Adam obeyed limply.

'Captain Auric is badly hurt, madame,' said Lauzun.

She made a gesture of impatience. 'He shall be properly cared for. Can you revive him for a moment? There is something I must say to you all ——'

Lauzun shrugged angrily, but he raised Charles's head on his shoulder and poured some brandy between his white lips.

There was a short silence, only broken by Diane, who, suddenly conscious of the sickly heat, threw off her cloak and discarded her dolman with stiff, jerky movements.

Charles opened his eyes, and raised himself on his sound elbow with a groan. 'Where the devil ——?' he began hoarsely; then broke off as he realized the presence of a strange lady, and bent his head with instinctive courtesy. 'Madame?' he added, after a pause of blank astonishment.

'My name,' said the strange lady, 'is Anna Ivanovna. I bid you all welcome to the house of my brother-in-law, Alexei Geraldin. Of you, Captain Auric, of Monsieur Lauzun, and this Polish gentleman, I have heard. But since when have women been enrolled in the battalion of "The Sacred Flies"?' And she stared under lowered lids at Diane, crouching by the fire.

'My wife, madame,' whispered Charles Auric. And even in the midst of his weariness and amazement Adam Konski felt a strange mingling of relief and disappointment.

'I am delighted to be given the opportunity to offer you rest and hospitality in this house,' Anna Ivanovna went on smoothly. 'It is an unexpected piece of good fortune. For to-morrow I had intended to set out to await you in Moscow.'

Lauzun started to his feet. 'What does this mean?' he cried.

Anna Ivanovna smiled. 'We are not all ignorant barbarians in Russia,' she said. 'Your Alsatian master grows careless, gentlemen. I was aware of your mission two days ago. For several years now — since Tilsit, to be exact — I have watched with amusement the fluttering to and fro of "The Sacred Flies." I am "The Spider," gentlemen, and I have spun my web!' And she turned back to the fire with a laugh.

Lauzun ripped out an oath. Adam and Diane stared helplessly at each other. Only Charles Auric mastered strength to whisper, 'Madame, my compliments!' before sinking back limply among his cushions.

'My brother will rejoice to see you,' continued Anna Ivanovna, talking quietly into the fire. 'He is,

I should warn you, a little strange in his middle age. He has foibles — weaknesses, you understand? He will never leave this house, so has little company. And it is his curious whim to be served only by retired fencing-masters. He has gathered them from all over Europe. Alexei is an amateur of the sword. And he cannot endure to be served by men younger than himself. You will find him an interesting study.'

She broke off, and Lauzun, who had made a movement of ludicrous violence towards the door, checked in his stride. The curtain was drawn aside, and four of the black-clad servants entered, with a small table, on which glittered silver dishes and two decanters of wine. Behind them followed four more, their duelling-swords naked in their right hands, lighted candles in silver candlesticks in their left.

Anna Ivanovna dropped a low curtsy, and laughed again.

'To "The Spider" who could be more welcome guests than "The Sacred Flies"?' she asked mockingly. 'My brother's servants shall light you to your rooms after supper. Be certain I shall house you well!'

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROOM OF SWORDS

Two hours later, Adam Konski and Philippe Lauzun sat gloomily on the edge of their respective beds in a room in which the door was locked on the outside and the windows were heavily barred. They had been politely but firmly disarmed downstairs. And they were wearing embroidered night-gowns, which had been provided thoughtfully in exchange for their drenched and dirty uniforms. They looked at each other without speaking. At length Lauzun rapped out an oath.

'In a play,' he said angrily, 'we should be in an unrivalled position to discuss the situation! But what in the name of all devils is there to discuss?'

Adam shook his head. 'Who is this woman?' he asked.

'Anna Ivanovna? God knows! I had heard of "The Spider"! It was our sobriquet among "The Flies" for our most persistent enemy. But "The Spider" was supposed to be an Austrian! Kestner must have been criminally careless — or he has a traitor at his elbow! It's appalling!' He swore and relapsed into silence.

Certainly from the point of view of their mission, the prospect looked hideously black. True, they were under cover, fed, and warmed. But they seemed to have walked blindfold into the enemy's jaws. Not only were they prisoners, but they were separated from Auric and Diane. At first Anna Ivanovna had ordered the separation of husband and wife into the bargain, but Diane had turned on her like a tigress, her eyes blazing in her white face, her voice shrill and hard with the fury that springs from panic.

'Unless you swear by the cross at your throat not to separate us,' she had cried, 'I will shoot him and myself!'

'Saving me, or a file of Russian grenadiers, the trouble!' smiled Anna Ivanovna.

Diane ignored the sneer; merely raised her hand, in which she held a small double-barrelled pistol. 'Choose!' she said.

'The Spider' shrugged her superb shoulders. 'I must admire such conjugal affection in this licentious age,' she murmured. 'It shall be as you wish, my dear.' And she brushed the silver crucifix she wore lightly with the tips of three fingers, before holding out her hand for the pistol.

So they had been marched off to their rooms in pairs by the silent, black-clad servants, all of whom

were middle-aged, and so handy with the rapiers they carried.

'And the place is like the Tuileries,' grumbled Lauzun. 'If we were free we could search for days and never find the others. It's like a new fashion in "oubliettes." We're not even across the line of advance. Kestner will write us off! We shall rot here for years — unless we're taken out to be hanged or shot! I tell you, Adam, that woman's a devil! A devil with the figure of a goddess!' he added ruefully, with, simultaneously, more than a suspicion of reminiscent gratification in his voice. Lauzun was very much a Frenchman.

'Perhaps the situation will seem less ridiculous in the morning,' was all that Adam could find to say in consolation.

Lauzun laughed savagely. Then simultaneously they sprang to their feet, their hands going automatically to their weaponless left sides. From somewhere in the house had rung out the most appalling shriek, followed by peal after peal of hideous laughter, and the sharp clashing of weapons.

'What is it, in God's name?' gasped Adam.

Lauzun tugged desperately at the door-handle, twisting it fiercely and quite uselessly. The sounds ebbed and flowed — maniac yells and bursts of laughter mingled with the grind and slither of

swords — till there came a final wolfish howl; presumably of triumph. On that absolute silence fell again, like a curtain. Adam and Lauzun looked at each other with white faces. At last the Frenchman achieved a rather wavering and uncertain smile. 'I suppose our host's original servants must keep in practice,' he said.

To which Adam could only reply by getting into bed and blowing out the candles. Under cover of the darkness he thanked God that at least that ghastly scream had not been a woman's. And Diane's face went with him steadfastly among his troubled dreams.

They passed three days in this imprisonment; days that were as intolerably long as centuries. They had nothing to do, for the room contained neither books nor cards. They had nothing to see, for the rain poured down unceasingly, and all the view from their barred window consisted of a dreary expanse of what must once have been a miniature imitation of the garden of Versailles: mathematically laid paths, miserably overgrown, ponds almost solid with accumulated scum, statues forlorn, stained, and mutilated . . . and beyond this wilderness the monotonous line of stone wall, above which appeared the rain-swept expanse of interminable plains.

Three times a day two of the servants brought food and wine. And after their meal Lauzun and Adam were escorted separately along the corridors of the house, and given the opportunity to stretch their legs. But they did not enter any of the rooms. Anna Ivanovna did not appear. And no word came from Auric or Diane. During the evening of the second day, too, they heard once more the terrifying howling and clatter of weapons from somewhere below their room. Apart from that for three days they might have been buried alive.

Lauzun quickly adapted himself, once he had recovered from his first exasperation. But to Adam Konski his position became hourly more and more insupportable. He was frightened to begin with — though he would have died before he would have admitted as much. But also he was worried beyond endurance on Diane's behalf, and very little less on account of his mission. His lieutenancy in the Guard was still to earn. By now the Emperor must be in full march for Moscow, and he and his companions were rotting in 'The Madman's House,' being fattened, like so many pigs, for ultimate slaughter. All day Adam sat by the window, huddled against the wall, biting his fingers, and revolving more and more crazy and improbable methods of escape. And the more he considered the problem,

the more utterly useless such consideration appeared to be.

By the fourth day he was desperate — the more desperate in that Lauzun refused even to discuss the chances of an escape. 'As you say, my dear Adam, we are here like pigs,' was all he would say. 'And, as the English put it, pigs might fly! But they don't! And neither do we. We must wait a little. The spider-lady has yet to show her hand. Why did I even start on this cursed journey without a pack of cards?' And he lay back on his bed, and whistled sentimental ballads of the Paris he adored, till Adam could most cheerfully have murdered him.

As on the previous days two servants brought them a meal at noon. But this time they brought also their uniforms, cleaned, dried, and brushed, so that for Adam at least the fantastic promenade along the silent corridors was less nightmarish than it had been when he had nothing more to wear than a shirt, an elaborately embroidered Russian nightgown, and fur slippers. So true it is that clothes make the man, that Adam, with hope revived and strength renewed as it were by the grateful sensation of being booted and brushed, having reached the farthest end of the second corridor, turned suddenly on his escort like a panther, and caught him fiercely by the throat.

To his amazement the man did not struggle. 'Let go, monsieur,' he whispered — and he spoke in Polish. 'I am your friend!'

Adam loosed his hold.

'I am a Pole,' said the servant hurriedly, with a furtive glance along the empty corridor. 'I will serve you if I can, before it is my turn to die.'

'What do you mean?' Adam demanded.

'That lunatic devil of a prince kills us one by one — all but his Russians!' said the servant. 'Kills us, and calls it fighting!' He stood away from Adam, trembling violently. 'This place is a bedlam of hell!' he went on. 'I dare not talk with you further! Take this, monsieur! But read it in your room!' And with another glance around him he pulled out a little square of folded paper and gave it to Adam. Then, as though nothing had happened, he stiffened again into the automatic stolidity of the servant, and led the astounded Adam back to his prison.

Lauzun was apparently still being exercised. Crossing to the window, Adam smoothed out the paper. As he had hoped — or feared — it was from Diane. It told him that she was alone and in despair. She had been separated from Charles. The second night of their imprisonment Anna had stolen in upon her with three servants while she slept, deprived her of her remaining weapon, and had

Charles carried off to some other room. Since then she had seen none but servants, and especially one, Tomas, whom she had discovered to be a Pole, and a French sympathizer. Tomas had promised to carry her note to Adam. 'We must do something quickly,' the note ended. 'I cannot sleep for thinking of Charles at that woman's mercy! I begin to fear I may go mad in this ghastly place!'

Adam crumpled it fiercely in his hand. At that moment the door was opened for and locked again upon Lauzun. Adam turned to face him, eyes blazing and lips working. 'We must do something!' he cried. And when Lauzun smiled and shrugged, Adam flung the crumpled note at his feet with a savage gesture.

Lauzun picked it up and read it. 'This would seem to put a new complexion upon the affair,' he said quietly.

'By God, it does,' snarled Adam.

Lauzun raised his eyebrows; then nodded comprehendingly. 'It gives us what I've been waiting for,' he went on — 'information, and an accomplice among the servants. Our host should have eschewed foreigners among his staff. But that is the worst of riding a hobby-horse. In the long run it masters you. So few Russians can fence! I suppose the poor devil could not help himself!'

'I am more interested in how we are to help ourselves,' Adam grumbled.

Lauzun smiled, and murmured his habitual comment upon Polish impatience. But to that Adam had grown accustomed. And afterwards the two of them whispered together in low voices.

The results of this deliberation became apparent a few hours later, when Tomas and one of his fellow-servants arrived with the usual evening meal. Opening the door of the room in which Adam and Lauzun were confined, they found themselves confronted apparently by an empty cage. They entered hastily in considerable alarm, and only realized too late that their captives had played almost the oldest trick in the history of prison-breaking, and had hidden themselves behind the door as it was opened. The two servants were neatly tripped, rolled over, and deprived of their weapons.

'You swear to serve us now?' demanded Adam, panting.

Tomas swore undying loyalty by a choice selection of Polish saints. The other man lay still, scowling and silent. Without the waste of further words, Lauzun gagged and bound him tightly and rolled him into a corner of the room like an old sack.

'And now,' he said to Tomas, 'lead us to our

comrade's room! A hint of treachery and you die as you stand!' And he suppled the lithe blade he had taken from the second servant in his lean brown hands.

'You can trust me,' said Tomas simply, and led the way.

So on tiptoe, every sense at stretch, and with bare swords in their right hands, Adam and Philippe Lauzun made their way along darkening corridors, that seemed the more interminable in the falling dusk. The house was utterly quiet, and cold as a tomb. At last, after what seemed to have been miles of walking, and the descent of three staircases, they came into a perfectly circular hall, which was, whispered Tomas, the exact centre of the strange house. And, drawing a heavy key from the pocket of his breeches, he pointed to a door. 'There is monsieur your comrade,' he said, with the slightest possible emphasis upon the word 'monsieur.' Lauzun stared at the man suspiciously, but Adam snatched the key, and flung open the door. The next instant Diane was in his arms. For the moment she had flung away the pretence of disguise. She clutched wildly at Adam's tunic as though with desperate need to convince herself of its reality and of his presence. And tears poured down her white cheeks while she sobbed out her misery and fear for

Charles. Adam did his best to soothe her, with that clumsy gentleness with which he would on occasion make much of Nimrod.

But Lauzun turned a grim face towards Tomas. 'Where is Captain Auric?' he said.

Tomas shrugged his shoulders.

'Don't be a fool, man!' said Lauzun quietly. He lifted his sword significantly, and it glinted evilly in the falling darkness.

Tomas flung up protesting hands, and stepped back. 'I do not know! I swear I do not know!' he cried shrilly. 'I would not lie to you, messieurs! I think he went with Madame ——'

'What?' And Adam gripped him fiercely by the shoulders.

'She is gone, messieurs! At noon to-day!' stammered Tomas. 'Or I would not have dared to help you. The Prince I hate — but Madame I fear.' He crossed himself grotesquely with a shaking hand.

'Where was he taken while he remained here?' continued Adam.

Diane leaned against the curving wall, spent, and pale. Tomas moistened his lips, that seemed suddenly to have gone very dry. Without another word he pointed to a second door immediately opposite that behind which Diane had been found.

'In there?' persisted Adam; and was across the hall in three strides. Tomas wrenched himself free from Lauzun, and flung himself in Adam's way. He was obviously in a sudden extremity of terror.

'It is the room beyond!' he gasped. 'This is the room of Prince Alexei. I implore you, monsieur, do not enter! Captain Auric has gone — I know it!'

Adam made a furious gesture of impatience. 'What is behind all this mystery and fear?' he cried. 'I would not harm you, Tomas, for you have served us well! But the secret of this room must be yielded up here and now!'

The old man dropped on his knees and gibbered fantastically. 'The Prince is mad!' he gasped out; and now the words tumbled out frantically upon each other's heels. 'There are three rooms beyond this door! The Prince's bedroom and his armoury, and a third in which Madame had Captain Auric confined. How and why I do not know! None but Madame passes into these rooms except when the Prince summons one of the servants to fight!'

'Armoury! Fight! Explain, man!' thundered Lauzun.

'His father — the first Prince Geraldin, who built this house — was mad! Prince Alexei lives under the curse of his father's blood! It breaks out in him from time to time — and in him it takes the form of

duelling to the death! The Prince is a master of fence — so he has collected us, who were fencing-masters in all the capitals of Europe, to serve him — and to fight him in turn when his madness comes upon him! Only Russians he will not fight. Of these he keeps about a score to guard him from conspiracy among the rest of us. So far twelve of us have died, messieurs. And I, Tomas Ogynski, am next on the list to fight! Now, messieurs, you know all!'

'Except where Charles is,' said Diane, who had pulled herself together, and stood watching Tomas, like a cat a mouse.

'He is no longer in the house,' said the latter. 'I am sure of it. I implore you, messieurs, to go while you may and to take me with you!'

'I don't leave this house without examining the rooms behind that door,' said Diane coldly. 'Charles may be lying in there under torture — or dead. Anything seems possible in this place.'

Lauzun nodded, but Tomas fell grovelling round Diane's feet. 'I beseech you,' he cried despairingly.

The girl noticed him no more than if he had been a beetle crawling on the floor. Her eyes were fixed on the closed door, and in their steady glance Adam read an irresistible order.

Holding his sword ready in his right hand, he stretched out his left; gripped the bronze door-

handle that was fashioned like a serpent's head; twisted it sharply; flung the door wide; and stepped back, bringing his rapier on guard. Lauzun and Diane moved forward eagerly. Tomas shrank back with a cry of fear. And then Diane laughed shrilly, for the room was empty, except of shadows and candlelight.

It was long and low, and very bare. There was no carpet on the polished wooden floor, and the only furniture consisted of a carved ebony writing-table, topped with stained red leather, and a carved ebony chair. At the farther end an empty fireplace was flanked by two doors, heavily curtained. There were no windows. A superb glass chandelier, in which half a dozen long candles glowed steadily, swung from the ceiling, which was pierced here and there with iron ventilators.

'But this is a nightmare!' said Lauzun at last.

The walls of the room were of naked stone, covered with naked weapons. They stood in racks; they hung in trophies; in sixes, in pairs, individually; gleaming wickedly as the light caught their blades. For this armoury of Alexei Geraldin's held no firearms. It consisted only of every variety of *arme blanche*. It was decorated with the steel of death.

There were spears, lances, javelins, and pikes; there were daggers of France, and stilettos of Italy;

there were Moorish scimitars, Persian yataghans, and Caucasian sabres; there was a pair of English cutlasses, a Kris from Malaya, and an Iroquois tomahawk from the Alleghenies; there were mediæval maces and battle-axes. But above all and everywhere, there were swords; from the crossed two-handed crusading swords above the mantelpiece to the pair of tiny court swords, hilted with gold and diamonds, lying on the tiny writing-table. There were Spanish *espadas*, and Scottish claymores, and massive executioners' glaives from the Low Countries. There were long thrusting swords, short stabbing swords, curved hacking swords; from Damascus, from Toledo, from Ferarra, and from all the cities of the world famous for the steelsmith's art.

Adam Konski stared round the room as though the dull glitter hypnotized him. But Lauzun turned back to the miserable Tomas, who was cowering in the doorway. 'Come in!' he ordered. 'And open the door of the room in which you say Captain Auric was imprisoned!'

Tomas shrank back into the shadows of the hall, and Lauzun was moving forward to drag him into the armoury, when he heard a stifled cry from Diane and turned round.

One of the inner curtained doors had been thrown

open from within, and a short black-clad figure shambled through it — the mad Prince, Alexei Geraldin. He was almost a dwarf, about five feet tall, with a monstrously large head bristling with sparse grey hair, and unusually long, ape-like arms. His face was smooth and plump, like a baby's, with big blue eyes. He stood by the black writing-table, swaying his lean body to and fro from the hips, almost as a tiger in captivity swings its head in anticipation of a meal. There was a trickle of saliva at one corner of his slack mouth.

'And who may you be?' he asked at last, in a shrill toneless voice like an eunuch's. Adam drew himself up. 'Where is Captain Auric?' he said.

Alexei Geraldin shook his head. 'I do not understand you,' he said slowly. He spoke in Russian. 'Your accent is Polish. I do not like Poles. Go away!'

'Where,' repeated Adam steadily, 'is Captain Auric?'

'I tell you I know nothing!' The dwarf's eyes began to glitter uncannily, and his voice to rasp. 'Leave my room! I do not care who you may be: you have no right here! The servant who admitted you shall be flogged till the blood runs! Blood! I tell you, blood!'

He ended with a scream, and began to pace back

and forth on the tips of his toes, as though in the figures of some weird and loathsome dance; his long arms waving, and his hands clawing at the empty air, as if he were grasping frantically at phantom partners who consistently eluded him.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIGHT IN THE ARMOURY

THAT Tomas had not lied — that Alexei Geraldin was mad — was clear enough to them all. But while Adam hesitated, for he had never met madness before and feared it proportionately, Lauzun walked forward swiftly into the middle of the room directly in the Prince's path. As a veteran soldier he had learned the value of rapid action. And once in his life he had had to deal with a mad dog . . . Diane also went forward, for she believed in her heart that Charles Auric, or his dead body, lay in one of the rooms behind Alexei Geraldin.

The prince seemed to notice none of them. It was, thought Adam, like being in a cage with an absent-minded tiger. For after his wild outburst, Alexei Geraldin appeared to have forgotten, or to have chosen to ignore, his visitors. He continued to prance, and to grimace, and to mutter to himself in Russian, till at last Philippe Lauzun laid the flat of his sword lightly across his breast.

At the touch the dwarf stopped in his tracks; crouched, glared, and spat like an animal. Next instant he had sprung away with a quickness and

agility almost incredible, and stood back to the wall, his great head thrust forward, his long arms flung wide. His right hand closed on a sword-hilt in one of the racks, his left on a dusty length of black cord that hung beside his bedroom door.

Lauzun sprang in. In a flash Alexei Geraldin had out his weapon on guard, parried strongly, and simultaneously wrenched at the cord. Somewhere in the depths of the house a bell pealed and jangled. And the Prince yelled triumphantly and burst into fiendish laughter, tiptoeing forward from the wall to thrust viciously at Lauzun.

Adam hesitated no longer. It was clear that Philippe's swordsmanship was no match for the mad Prince's, and in a moment the servants would be upon them. In his turn he levelled his sword and ran in. Adam could fence — even his uncle Ignatius had admitted so much. But never had he fought such a swordsman as the dwarf Prince. Alexei proved more than a match for Adam and Lauzun together. Adam's sword went spinning across the polished floor. Lauzun leaped in to cover him. Adam stooped to recover his weapon; heard a cry from the hall, a gasp from Diane. Next instant Tomas Ogynski was hurled bleeding across the threshold. Five of the servants broke in across his body. And out of the tail of his eye Adam saw

Lauzun reel and go down, the Prince's blade through his throat. Another instant and that blade would have pierced Adam Konski through the back. But Diane had not been daughter of the Marquis de Frontenac for nothing. In her turn she ripped a sword from the wall and engaged the Prince, so that Adam had space to find his breath and a fresh weapon.

He found both. But he found something more which stood him in even better stead. He found a real berserk fury, compounded of boiling courage and the ice-cold lust to kill. In part it arose from the utter desperation of his own condition; in part from the example of the girl coolly crossing swords with the madman; but mostly from the sight of Philippe Lauzun's twisted body, still writhing a little on the floor, his hands clutching at his throat, his face stamped so cruelly with the seal of sudden death. The situation might be desperate; the stark courage which Diane summoned up so gallantly at each crisis of the adventure might cry out to him more and more urgently. But it was the dead Lauzun who now tore at his heart-strings, and made him mad: Lauzun who now would never again whistle or hum or sing: never chaff Charles Auric for a lack of humour, nor Adam for a lack of patience; Lauzun who had saved his life in that moment when he had

sprung between Adam Konski helpless and disarmed and Prince Alexei Geraldin . . .

Adam glanced round him. He felt curiously cold and detached. He was breathing rather quickly through his nose, and his brain was working very fast, very logically. Geraldin for the moment was held in play by Diane. He had fought two men in as many minutes and was not unnaturally a little tired. And the daughter of the Marquis who had ridden with Lafayette owned a quickness of hand and eye, a sureness of parry, that made Adam feel like a peasant handling a sword for the first time. But there were the servants to consider . . .

For the moment they stood clustered by the door into the circular hall. Very luckily for Adam, Prince Geraldin did not care to be interrupted during a fight, and the servants saw no more than one Frenchman dead on the floor, a second disarmed against the wall, and a third, a mere stripling, engaged with their master. They waited accordingly for orders. None came. Prince Geraldin was recovering his breath; he was sliding nearer his opponent inch by inch, thrusting more and more strongly . . .

All this Adam observed in one swift glance. Fixed in a trophy, head-high, as its central piece, a straight heavy broadsword hung on the wall some three feet from his left hand, point upwards. It was long

beyond the ordinary, and double-edged; the ideal weapon for a mêlée against odds, which must be decided by cut rather than thrust.

Adam made one quick step, like a great cat, and tore the broadsword from the wall. It came easily. Some string snapped; and a miscellaneous collection of daggers and rapiers clattered to the floor from the violated trophy. The servants, whose eyes had been on the Prince, looked round and ran forward. But Adam was in no mind to await their coming where he was. With a fierce shout he jumped between Geraldin and Diane; beat down the former's sword; and, catching Diane by the shoulder, spun her round, and thrust her against the corner of the fireplace of Geraldin's bedroom.

'Guard my back!' he called. And on that the servants charged across the room, urged on by a string of blasphemies from the Prince's lips.

It was a fatal move. Had they played Adam one by one, they must have tired him out and killed him at their leisure. The combined attack gave him just what he needed. He crouched a little as they came, then moved half a pace back, and swung the great sword like a flail. Elderly men all of them, with no advantage save their numbers and their tricks of fence, they were in no case to meet a young man, who fought according to no human

rules, and whose length of blade gave him a safety margin of fully six inches. In the first minute Adam had splintered two rapiers, killed one man, and hamstrung another, catching him just below the knee with the return sweep of his sword. The others then cowered back. But Adam was not fighting for points, but for Diane's life and his own, and to give Lauzun an escort worthy of him down the corridors of Death. He followed up his advantage. His sword flashed and circled, rose and fell. Two more of the fencing-master servants fell with it. The fifth dropped his rapier, and ran to where Alexei Geraldin stood in the middle of the room under his great chandelier, with a beaming smile on his hateful, chubby face.

Adam faced him, breathing heavily. There was a cut in his cheek, and a small clean hole through the upper part of his left arm. With his hair dishevelled and blood dripping from his sword, he looked as desperate a cut-throat as ever drew sword, and any one who knew both of them would have observed a distinct likeness to his uncle Ignatius Konski. The difference lay in the eyes. Ignatius's eyes were always angry, often sulky, occasionally wild. Adam's were now both glad and merciless, and, as he met their gaze, the smile died from Alexei Geraldin's thick lips, his hand tightened on the hilt

of his rapier, and he tiptoed forward, spurning the wretched servant out of his way with a savage thrust of one elegant shoe.

Diane put a hand on Adam's sleeve. 'Let me take him,' she whispered urgently.

Adam did not turn his head. Only his eyes flickered once more to where Lauzun lay sprawled across the floor, in a pool of his own blood. And then his blade went out to cross Geraldin's.

With the Prince his mad slashing would be useless —so much Adam realized at once. And almost as quickly he realized also that Geraldin's long arms nullified the advantage given him by the unusual length of his weapon. The Prince's rapier seemed to slither round and round his blade like a silver serpent, darting a fraction of an inch nearer second by second; till at last it licked through the steel basketwork of the broadsword's hilt.

Adam cursed and sprang back, dropping his point. Blood was running warm and sticky on his fingers, and his hand hurt most damnably. Alexei Geraldin sprang in — and sprang a moment too soon. Had he delayed, Adam must have relaxed his hold on his sword and been at his mercy. As it was, the sudden imminence of the danger renewed his strength so far that he achieved one more firm parry. And on that, as the Prince's sword was de-

flected past his right shoulder, Adam dropped his own and leaped straight at Geraldin's throat.

Locked in each other's arms they lurched across the room, the Prince still clutching his rapier, and striving to beat in Adam's face with its hilt. It was a stark, cruel struggle to the death, and Adam, luckily for him, had the better hold. The madman was unbelievably strong; he writhed, and bit, and tore frantically with his nails. But he could not loosen the fingers that were like a vise about his throat; and suddenly the twisted body went limp between Adam's hands.

Adam let go. And Alexei Geraldin, cunning as a fox even in that extremity, collapsed to the floor, apparently dead. Adam straightened himself slowly, and drew out a handkerchief to tie round his bleeding hand. As he did so, the Prince jerked himself to his knees. There was a dagger in his hand. But he was too weak to drive his thrust straight and clean. It came unsteadily, and Adam dashed the hand that held it aside with one blow of his fist; picked Geraldin from the floor; shook him like a rat, and flung him so that his head smashed three of the lowest glass lustres that swung from the chandelier, before crashing to the floor.

This time there had been no mistake. Alexei Geraldin's neck was broken; and his fantastic life had reached its fantastic end.

CHAPTER X

INTERLUDE

THAT night — the night of the 18th of August — Napoleon sat alone in an upper room in a house in Smolensk. It was a small room, with a small balcony and ill-fitting shutters. Those shutters were open, and, sitting there at a table over his maps, the Emperor could see patch after crimson patch of smouldering ruins against the surrounding darkness, and smell the bitter reek of fire from the houses set alight by the Russians before they evacuated the town.

Should he halt or go forward? Should he be content with Smolensk for that year, or should he compel peace in Moscow? Napoleon leaned his head wearily on his hand, and coughed a little. He was beginning — only beginning — to feel his age. Once he could sleep when he chose, and spend days and nights on end in the saddle. Now there were moments when nothing — not even the undivided Empire of the West, nor the fascination of the great game of War of which he was undisputed master — could occupy his mind and will to the exclusion of physical weariness from his body.

Should he halt or go forward? His great stroke against the Russian armies had been spoiled by his brother Jerome's incompetence. Bagration had joined Barclay. And Smolensk had been voluntarily evacuated, not stormed. No word came from Alexander; and nothing from Kestner and his myrmidons of 'The Sacred Flies' to indicate the trend of opinion in Moscow.

Should he halt or go forward? He flicked ineffectively at the scattered snuff on his shabby green coat, and dabbed *eau de cologne* upon his forehead. From the devastated town rose the mingled noises of the Grand Army bivouacking, as it had done so often before, among ruined buildings and dead men.

Napoleon rose. Twice and thrice he made measurements on his map. But it was no question of measuring distance, but of measuring the constancy of the soul of a people. The map was useless. And this he knew.

He paced two or three times up and down the little room, and sat down again heavily in his chair. The army was dwindling, rations were failing, summer was dying. But Moscow was within his grasp — and surely in Moscow lay the final decision of the War.

Once more the Emperor leaned his head on his hand. Certainly he was very weary. His eyes closed.

For a few minutes only he slept, sitting there above his maps. And as he slept he dreamed.

In his dream he stood, as in imagination he had stood a hundred times, upon the small ridge from which the traveller from the west sees Moscow. He stood there under a strange red dawn. Massed below him, above the flaunting tricolours, glittered the bronze eagles of the Empire which had borne victory in their talons to Lisbon and to Warsaw, to Naples and Lubeck. It seemed that they hung now poised for victorious onslaught with beak and claw upon the ancient capital of Holy Russia. And with them also hovered the white eagles of Poland, hungry for revenge on their despoilers, and — though only by constraint of conquest — Prussia's black eagles, and the two-headed eagle of Austria; while sombrely magnificent upon its field of imperial yellow, the black double eagle of all the Russias flaunted above the doomed capital; one head facing its massed enemies in impotent defiance; the other craning eastward, as though seeking safety and yet greater dominion in the great spaces of the Orient. . . .

The Emperor woke. He moved his arm sharply, and a heavy book, which he had found somewhere in the room, and had used to weight his maps, fell heavily to the ground.

Napoleon picked it up. It had fallen open; was

printed in some script resembling Greek, and illuminated. It intrigued the Emperor's restless mind, so that he sent for an inhabitant of the town. They brought into his presence a priest who had chosen to stay by his church when the Russian army left Smolensk.

'What is this book?' asked the Emperor. The priest crossed himself. 'It is an old copy of the Bible, Sire,' he answered.

The Emperor coughed painfully. 'As you know,' he said roughly, 'I believe only in my star. I despise other superstitions. Tell me — what is this verse at the head of the page at which that book fell open?'

The priest stroked his beard. '"Where the carcase is,"' he intoned solemnly, "there shall the eagles be gathered together."'

Napoleon took a pinch of snuff and nodded brusquely. With a word of thanks, he dismissed the priest, sat down at his table, and sent for Berthier, his chief of staff.

Next morning he reviewed the Grand Army outside the walls of Smolensk, and the advance on Moscow went forward.

CHAPTER XI

CARDS ON THE TABLE

It was already full day when Charles Auric, waking slowly and painfully, realized that for the first time since he had left 'The Madman's House' he was in a bed, and that his fever had left him. Of the journey he remembered little. He had been mercifully drugged; and his mind retained little but a nightmare jumble of impressions: continual pain; the continual jolting of an ill-sprung carriage along those tracks of trodden earth that in Russia passed for roads; lanterns; lowered voices talking a language he could not understand; and, continually, in the background, Anna Ivanovna's great luminous eyes, watching him with what seemed a mixture of pity and scorn — watching him, tending him, weighing him in the balance, as though for some purpose of her own. Charles was a brave man, and for the most part a hard man. Yet he admitted to himself that the white face and triangular eyes of 'The Spider' frightened him . . .

With a great effort — for he felt as weak as a kitten — he turned onto his back. The sun shone brightly in upon his pale unshaven face, and illum-

inated the dusty hangings of the great bed in which he lay. He could see that the room was lofty, luxuriously furnished with gilt and carving, and that there was some elaborate coat-of-arms in tarnished golden embroidery worked on the canopy above his head. Through the window, outlined against the sunlit sky, as though cut out of cardboard, Charles could see the upper half of a gilded dome, and wondered idly where he might be. Some old house, presumably, facing a church, he thought. And in general he was not far wrong. As he was shortly to discover, he lay in an upper room in the ancient palace of Rostopchin, Governor of Moscow; and the dome at which he gazed so casually was one of the domes of the Kremlin. The road to it had been unusual, but Charles Auric had reached the goal set for him by Monsieur Kestner. He was in the heart of the enemy's citadel. But for the moment, being supremely ignorant of his whereabouts and feeling incredibly weak, Charles could think of nothing better to do than to turn on his side, lift the edge of the sheet and blanket to keep the sun out of his eyes, and relapse into a sleep that was no longer drugged.

When he woke again, Anna Ivanovna was watching him. He noticed that she still wore her dress of crimson velvet, cut in the queer old-fashioned

ecclesiastical lines that gave the impression of a figure cut out of a window of stained glass. And this effect was increased by the movements of her large beautiful hands, which were not so much affected as studiedly formal. They did not jerk, nor flutter aimlessly to and fro. They moved with her words and then were still: perhaps folded in her lap, or against her breast; or one resting along her thigh, the other beneath her chin. They gave her a great poise of certainty and capacity, those large white hands on which glowed and flashed three magnificent jewels; rings with single stones, emerald, ruby, and diamond.

'So you are awake, and stronger,' she said. 'I am glad.' But her expression did not change. Her face was still that painted mask in which the eyes alone lived, as though imprisoned, and out of which they stared, as though in their imprisonment they suffered torture.

Charles tried to raise himself on one elbow. In an instant Anna Ivanovna was at the bedside, supporting his shoulders with one arm, and piling pillows in comfort behind his head with the other. He felt like a child in her more than masculine grasp. And he realized with a certain horror that her hands were cold like stone.

'Where is this place?' he asked at last.

The woman stood back, looking down on him. 'I believe you were sent to Moscow,' she said. 'You have arrived — that is all.' And she pointed through the window at the gilded dome.

Charles moved feverishly on his pillows. 'But why have you brought me here?' he stammered. 'Where are my comrades?'

Anna Ivanovna shook her head slowly in disapproval. 'You must not excite yourself,' she said. 'Listen quietly, and I will tell you everything.'

'Well?' demanded Charles impatiently. Every moment he felt stronger, more alive, more conscious of grave and imminent danger.

'The Spider' pulled a chair to the side of the bed, and spread out her hands before her on the white coverlet.

'I have brought you here,' she began deliberately, 'because I believe we can be of use to each other. I lay no traps. I put down my cards. It has been my task for some years now to watch "The Sacred Flies." Sometimes one has stung me. Some I have devoured, as spiders will!'

She paused, and a smile for a moment intensified the curves of her painted lips. 'Among them all, Captain Auric, I have marked you for the bravest, the firmest of purpose, and the least childishly scrupulous. You understand?'

'I do not,' said Charles, looking away quickly as though the sunshine hurt his eyes.

'Shall I draw the curtains?' asked Anna Ivanovna mockingly. 'I will speak more plainly still. Who will conquer in this war?'

Charles moistened dry lips. 'I am a soldier of France,' he muttered.

'No,' retorted the woman quietly, 'you are a soldier of Napoleon. And Napoleon is doomed. He has challenged Fate once too often. Consider — if he takes Moscow — what then? He will be seven hundred miles from his bases on the Vistula. A line of communications seven hundred miles long, at the mercy of raiding Cossacks! The Grand Army is dying as it marches. It entered Russia half a million strong. As yet it has not fought a battle — only skirmishes — and it entered Smolensk with no more than half the men who crossed the frontier. How many will live to enter Moscow? And when they have entered it, what then?'

Charles frowned. 'What end does all this serve?' he asked angrily. 'I am a captain of cavalry. The campaign is the Emperor's business!'

'It is his last campaign,' said Anna Ivanovna. And there was such deadly conviction in her smooth tones that Charles shivered as he lay. 'He expects to compel peace in Moscow. Has he forgotten our

Emperor's oath? He and the army will withdraw — to Turkestan or Siberia if need be! But Russia will not make peace, though every one of her cities be occupied!'

'But what in God's name has all this to do with me?' cried Charles.

'Your fortunes have been bound up with those of your Emperor till now,' continued 'The Spider.' 'Are you prepared to keep them bound to a falling star?'

Charles was beginning a furious retort when he felt his left hand grasped firmly by the woman's right. She leaned forward to catch and hold his eyes with her own, so that it was as if by that magnetic, almost hypnotic gaze she drained the reviving strength and will from his exhausted frame. The words died on his lips, and he lay back spent and breathless, listening to her as though through a mist of unreality.

'Who is ruler of Russia?' asked Anna Ivanovna. 'Alexander! A sheer idealist, who shrinks from shadows on the staircase for fear of his murdered father's ghost? Alexander! An elegant phrase-maker, who should be doubly damned in that he means so well! No! Not Alexander, nor any of his back-biting courtiers or pig-headed generals! Do you forget the great Catherine? And the Empress

Elizabeth? It is the women who are men in Russia! And it is I, Anna Ivanovna, who rule Russia to-day!'

She broke off; and in those tortured eyes shone a glow of exaltation. Her grandeur was crazy. Yet it remained great. It was loathsome, but it was terrible. It was so murderously, so inhumanly cold. She did not raise her voice, nor lift a hand. She merely spoke, rather slowly, and with a great distinction. While all the fallen angels of arrogance, self-confidence, and power, were reflected in her eyes. In Anna Ivanovna was the compelling magnetism, not of personality, but of impersonality. And in that white flame Charles Auric's very human individualism was scorched and withered like a cut flower.

'Your comrades are dead by now,' the voice went on. 'My half-brother Alexei will have seen to that, poor crazy devil!'

'And — my wife?' whispered Charles.

'The Spider's' eyes seemed to widen. 'Your comrades are dead!' she reflected.

Charles plucked feverishly at the neck of his shirt. 'Would you have me betray my uniform?' he said hoarsely.

Anna Ivanovna nodded. Then from her breast she drew out a folded paper and gave it to Charles Auric. He stared at it for a moment uncomprehendingly. It was the imprint of the Imperial bee, and was dated from Wilno.

'I send you as a present,' it ran, 'four of my fatted flies — three Frenchmen, of whom two are dangerous, and one may serve as well, and a Pole, of whom it is desired to dispose. All goes to a perfection that is marvellous. — K.'

'Kestner! My God! Kestner, a traitor!' cried Charles.

'It is true,' said Anna. 'And yet he is no traitor. He was an official under the Old Régime. He took an oath to Louis XVI, and to France. There is no longer France — there is only Napoleon. He buys glory with French blood — and pays too dearly! It is time a halt was called. And called it will be. The Empire will fall. Do you fall with it, Charles Auric? You must choose!'

The great eyes seemed to bore and burn into his brain. Charles sat up with a jerk. His face was ashen, and damp with sweat. His hands shook uncontrollably. 'I cannot think!' he gasped out. 'Leave me! You must give me time! You must give me time!' And he fell back on the bed, writhing his body away from the side where Anna Ivanovna sat, and lay still, his face buried in his hands.

For a few moments 'The Spider' stood looking down on his body huddled in the bedclothes. Then she turned and went quietly from the room. She was smiling very cruelly — but now quite humanly.

CHAPTER XII

CHARLES MAKES HIS CHOICE

DAY after day Charles Auric lay in the upper room of Rostopchin's palace. And day after day his physical strength came back to him, and his spirit — for all that he would have repudiated violently so fanciful a term — drained away. The brief truth lay in the fact that he saw none but Anna Ivanovna. She nursed him back to health with a patient strength and understanding that were amazing. And simultaneously she fascinated and took possession of him, as a weasel fascinates a rabbit before it kills. In part, no doubt, it resulted from the influence of her beauty and her strength upon a man who, weak with wounds, had for the first time lost all self-confidence. In part it may have been caused by the subtle drugs under which Charles had been brought insensible to Moscow from 'The Madman's House.' But Russia remains always of the East rather than of the West. And in Russians is to be found a hypnotic power seldom granted to the children of Western civilization. A hundred years later the eyes of a Siberian peasant, a figure infinitely more squalid than Anna Ivanovna, were to

enslave personalities nobler than Charles Auric, and by their fascination to contribute largely to the downfall of the Romanoffs. And it was not long before Charles lay utterly at 'The Spider's' mercy. He fretted when she left him. When she was with him his eyes followed her about his room like a dog's. His mind, and especially his memory, seemed to decay. He grew a short fair beard, and abandoned his tattered uniform for Russian dress. He even made half-hearted attempts to speak Russian. And for hours he would sit listlessly at his window looking down with vacant eyes into the square outside the palace. After the first three days he no longer asked questions about the French advance, or the fate of his comrades. In his sickness his body had become an empty house, and now seven devils had entered into possession . . .

At last one evening Anna Ivanovna led him from his room. They passed together along corridors magnificently gilded, beneath painted ceilings, and down great staircases, along whose walls hung portraits of the Tsars. They went through the great hall with its rugs of white bearskins, its bowls and vases of malachite and alabaster, its cabinets of gold and ivory; and through a small iron door down into the cold bowels of the palace.

'Listen, but say nothing!' said Anna Ivanovna.

She paused at a door which looked like the entrance to a cellar. Before it stood two grenadiers with crossed bayonets. She gave some password, and they fell back and opened the door.

'Come,' said 'The Spider,' and went in. Charles followed her tall figure into the presence of the weirdest gathering he had ever seen.

The room was obviously nothing more nor less than an immense cellar. The walls and floor were of bare stone, and the atmosphere was that of a vault — thick, cold, and dank. Oil lamps, hanging from a groined ceiling thick with cobwebs and accumulated grime, cast a flickering and uncertain yellow light over the assembly. There were perhaps three hundred men packed in that cellar, standing in rows which were flanked at each end by armed soldiers with ordered muskets. They stood in silence, save for the continual shifting of their feet, and gazed apathetically in front of them.

Never, thought Charles, had he seen such a hangdog and at the same time such a villainous-looking crowd. Most were middle-aged. A few were white-haired. All were dirty, with bleared eyes, and the expressions of sullen animals. Their hair was close-cropped. Their clothes were ragged and filthy, and smelled abominably. And, as Anna Ivanovna led the way down the length of the room

in front of them, Charles caught glimpses of here a harelip, there a broken nose, or blackened, splintered teeth, or some ghastly squint beneath a low, brutal forehead, that made him wince and jerk his eyes away, under the impression that he had fallen into the pit of lost souls.

At the far end of the room was a small table, set at an angle, and behind it three chairs. In the one in the middle sat a big burly man with grey hair, his squarish heavy face deeply pitted with the marks of smallpox. A dark blue uniform showed beneath his heavy fur coat, and an order in brilliants glinted at his throat. He sat slouched in his chair motionless, as though more than half asleep. Charles recognized him with a start. It was Kutusoff, who had recently succeeded Barclay de Tolly in chief command of the armies of Russia. On his left sat a lean, dark man with brilliant eyes and a square black beard. He wore civil dress, and seemed as wide-awake as the general was drowsy. Charles did not know it, but this was the man in whose house he had lain for so many days — Rostopchin, the Governor of Moscow. The third chair was empty.

Anna Ivanovna swept up to the table with the carriage of a Grand Duchess. Kutusoff did not move; did not blink an eyelid. But the Governor sprang to his feet and offered her the third chair

with an air of great ceremony. 'The Spider' bent her head, with a superb arrogance in the acknowledgment, and sat down on the general's right, beckoning Charles to stand behind her with a casual wave of her long hand.

Rostopchin whispered a word to Kutusoff, who did not move, but emitted a sort of barking grunt, apparently of acquiescence, for the Governor stood up to his full height, and clapped his hands smartly together to command attention, causing the throng of cropped heads and vacant evil faces to swing in his direction. Charles noticed that several of the men were furtively licking their lips, and that the armed guards held their muskets ready cocked. He had found Russian almost impossibly difficult to learn to speak, but he had picked up enough from Anna Ivanovna to understand it fairly well when spoken. And as the Governor made his short speech, with deliberate slowness of delivery and distinctness of pronunciation, so that every word rang clearly to the farthest end of the long cellar, Charles listened more and more eagerly, firmly in the grip of what remained an unwilling admiration of the courage and grandeur of the plan that was in this manner revealed.

Rostopchin spoke for about five minutes. Then he broke off with startling abruptness. Charles drew

a long breath and glanced along the room. As he looked he flinched, visibly, and Anna Ivanovna smiled. For where had been only apathy, despair, and the sullen brutality of caged animals, Charles now saw the desperation of reviving hope, the awakening lusts of beasts suddenly set free, the gallant madness of men doomed to a forlorn hope; and all along the bare stone walls crept whispers, rising to a growl of bottomless hatreds long repressed.

Rostopchin flung up his hand, and silence fell again. Then he spoke once more — a brief question, answered by a howling yell, and a forest of hands upraised to the grimy roof. The shadows thrown by the lamps danced in fantastic figures on the walls.

The Governor smiled, and sat down. Anna Ivanovna nodded her head gravely in approval. Followed the rattle of weapons, the creaking of doors, and the clatter of many feet, as the sweepings of the prisons of Moscow were marched out under escort to be prepared for the duty they had chosen, with the recompense of their liberty, and, almost certainly, at the price of their lives.

Kutusoff remained slumped in his chair. In those five minutes while Rostopchin spoke, that plan had for the first time been revealed which was to save his country, and change the history of the civilized world. But Kutusoff was a soldier, an elderly man,

and tired from a long day's riding. Why, indeed, should he not sleep if he felt so disposed?

Back in his own room Charles flung himself on the bed, and hid his face in his hands. Anna Ivanovna's triumphant gaze fixed upon him was more than he could endure. But though he could hide his face, he could not shut out the remorseless voice that continued as placidly as any smooth deep-running stream: 'You understood, my dear Charles? I think you did. I must congratulate you on your progress in the language. You do me credit. But now that you have understood — at whose door do you lay the scheme? Kutusoff's, that fat old sluggard? Or Rostopchin's, with his silver tongue? The man can speak, I admit it, but this plan called for a brain! Whose, my friend? Was it mine? I think it was!'

'I think you are a devil!' muttered Charles.

'Because I have kept my head, while your Emperor has lost his? What loyalty!' sneered 'The Spider.' 'Think of it, Charles! A dying army marches into an empty city — a dying army with, for its chief, a man, once great, who has lost all sense of values, of time and space! He will compel peace — from the eagles on the Kremlin's walls, or the cross of Saint Ivan on its golden dome? With the stones of the streets or the glass in the windows?

Peace, where there is no peace! And then, when he would lie still, reorganize, and plan anew, comes the fire! Think of it, Charles! Three hundred desperate men with torches in their hands, lust of destruction in their hearts, and an empty city at their mercy! No water, and no pumps to fight this enemy, to whom powder is as so much food, against whom sabres and bayonets are futile! What will he do?'

Charles, crouching on the bed, felt Anna Ivanovna's hands gripping his bowed shoulders.

'Will he stay in a desert of flame, a wilderness of dust and ashes?' she went on. 'Will he advance to St. Petersburg in the teeth of winter, with his dying battalions? Or will he go back — back to Europe, his tail between his legs like a whipped cur? And if he goes back, will he get there? Seven hundred miles — Kutusoff and winter on his heels — Platoff and the Cossacks hanging on his rear — and Wittgenstein's army in full march for his northern flank? Escape! No, my friend! The Revolution has ridden fast and far — but it rides no farther. Napoleon is doomed.'

She paused. Her gripping hands tightened, and wrenched Charles Auric roughly upright so that he was compelled to face her. 'And now you must choose between the falling and the rising stars!' she

ended proudly. Charles cowered back. His hands shook. His voice quavered miserably.

'God knows who you are!' he cried. 'Or what you have done to me! You have stolen my honour, my loyalty, my uniform, and my courage! And I cannot even kill you!' He beat his forehead wildly with his clenched fists. 'And I forget! My God, I forget everything!' he groaned.

Anna Ivanovna sat down, and held out both hands. An immense tenderness suddenly came into her voice, and shone from her painted face — a tenderness most cruel and horrible in its overwhelming certainty. 'I will take care of you,' she said quietly. 'Come to me.'

For a moment Charles Auric stared at her, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, tears trickling down his cheeks. Then a great sob burst from his chest. He stumbled forward. His hands closed about her throat only to fall impotently to his sides. And Charles fell on his knees before 'The Spider' as she sat, and dropped his throbbing head upon her lap. There was a long silence.

'I think you are wise, my dear,' said Anna Ivanovna.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CITY OF FLAME

About midnight of Wednesday, September 16, Ignatius Konski was sitting his charger on a small rise, some two miles southwest of the city of Moscow. He was in command of a cavalry regiment keeping touch between the army of occupation and Murat's advance-guard, which was groping to regain touch with Kutusoff. His men, clustered dismounted below and behind him, saw Ignatius as a huge equestrian statue of black steel against the crimson sky. The great wind, which had risen with the flames, as though giving nature's help and approval to the incendiaries, roared wildly around him, wrenching at his tattered *czapka* plume, and driving his long white cavalry cloak before it like a sail. But Ignatius sat like a rock, holding in his fretting horse with iron fingers. On his face lay a savage scowl. Moscow blazed upon its self-appointed pyre two full miles away. Yet with his single eye Ignatius had read plainly his orders for the next day by the light of the flames.

Those orders — to report for escort duty next day at the Kremlin — could mean but one thing.

They meant retreat. And Ignatius knew it. It was on that pitiless fact that he brooded, sitting there in the lurid darkness. For the first time since he had served Napoleon, the Emperor was withdrawing in the face of an enemy. It was like the end of the world; an end which he could almost imagine as imminent, on such a night of fire and hurricane. And yet at the same time there lurked in the corner of his slow-moving brain a bitter satisfaction. For instinctively, animal-like, Ignatius had anticipated and dreaded catastrophe; and clamped his jaw more firmly upon the expression of his fear, for the very reason that it was fear; something strange and terrible.

Ignatius Konski had been with the first squadron of French riders which had entered Moscow by the Smolensk Barrier in the early afternoon of September 14. He had won this privilege by his gallantry at Borodino, where he had had three horses killed under him before leading the final torrent of cavalry which took the great redoubt in the rear and severed the spinal cord of the Russian position. He was offered the Cross, but instead begged Napoleon that he might ride into the city with the advance-guard, the Polish banner of his regiment behind him. And this the Emperor, coughing more and more, smiling a little mechanically, had granted him.

So he, and a few more mounted men, closely followed by the solid marching columns of the Grand Army, now some ninety thousand strong, had passed the Barrier and entered the city. There was no deputation of humbled notables to meet the army; no sentry or watchmen in the small stone buildings flanking the Barrier; no crowd of curious loiterers along the broad ribbon of bare earth which led into the city's heart. And, as he rode, the exaltation of conquest, of vengeance achieved, of pride in his country and in his leader, of personal vanity supremely triumphant, flickered and died. For perhaps a mile ahead Ignatius could see the bare road: it lay open and empty as the Polish plains; deserted, desolate. Ignatius felt his heart tighten, as though touched by an invisible hand. He glanced sideways at his comrades. Their brisk trot had fallen to a walk. They stared straight before them, unwilling to recognize the reality of the evacuation. Behind them a marching regiment had entered, singing behind their blaring band, as they had sung in the gates of Vienna and Berlin. But this time the audience essential to the triumph was lacking. There were no flowers — no welcoming sympathizers, no pretty girls to ogle at the windows, no crowds to cheer, nor even to mutter curses. Only closed doors, and barred shutters, and silence; so

that an officer's voice giving an order echoed like the Last Trump, and the footfalls of the column like the anvil strokes of an ancient god. Only here and there skulking figures lurked in doorways, shifted and vanished like wraiths of smoke.

'It's a trick!' growled an old hussar in Ignatius's ear. 'It's impossible! The place can't have been emptied. It couldn't have been done!'

But there had been no miracle except of accomplishment. It had been done. And the hammering with musket-butts upon unresponsive doors, by soldiers breaking their ranks under the intolerable strain of the silence, seemed to drive the grim fact of the evacuation into the officers' puzzled brains. To Ignatius came more than conviction of the abandonment of Moscow. A Pole of Poles, he feared Russia as he loathed Russia — inordinately, instinctively. Being, like all good regimental officers, unimaginative, the silence of the streets, the blankly shuttered houses, did not get on his nerves. They impressed him as an omen: as a warning of some trap, some prepared disaster. It was the latter consciousness that chilled his spirit, and soured the fruits of victory in his mouth.

So strong grew this oppression of spirit that Ignatius suddenly wheeled his charger round, and galloped headlong back to the Smolensk Barrier to

meet the Emperor. To him, flushing crimson under the supercilious eyes of the marshals, he reported the condition of the city, adding that he feared an ambush on some devilish and enormous scale.

Napoleon scoffed. Then he grew very angry, realizing there must be some truth in Ignatius's report from the fact that there was no municipal deputation to meet him in submission at the Barrier. In his anger he ordered Ignatius roughly off to join Murat, as he was afraid of the city! And Ignatius, with mingled bitterness and apprehension in his heart, had saluted and ridden away.

When he had gone, Napoleon waited by the Barrier for the signs he expected of the city's acknowledgment of conquest. When still none came, he would not enter Moscow that day. He spent the night in a mean hut outside the walls. Perhaps in those hours, while he sat on his little white Polish cob, among his gorgeous marshals on their great thoroughbreds, there came to him some realization of what it would mean if Borodino had been fought in vain; if peace could not be compelled in the capital, because Moscow was no longer a city . . .

He slept ill, before rising to pass the Barrier early the next morning. As he entered the city, the great wind began to blow from the north and the dust to fly in the dry streets. And late that same night rose

the first red shoots of the fire, upon whose full magnificence of fury Ignatius Konski gazed twenty-four hours later, in unaccustomed fascination and horror, remembering the prophecy of the tattered Lithuanian peasant on the night when the fires had burned along the Niemen.

Konski was roused from his grim broodings by the subaltern commanding his picquet line, who suddenly cantered out of the darkness.

'Two prisoners, sir — claiming to be French,' he reported; and had to raise his voice almost to shouting pitch in the face of the roaring gale.

'Tie them up for the night!' snarled Ignatius, still gazing at the burning city. 'No! Bring them here — to me!' And, half glad of the excuse to abandon his exposed position, he turned and slowly walked his horse down the slope into the shelter of the cluster of pines in whose cover his men had offsaddled and bivouacked as best they might.

But however much Ignatius may have looked forward to anything which should break the monotony of his depression, he could not in his wildest flight of imagination have conceived the identity of the prisoners he was to confront. If he could not believe his eyes, he was hardly to be blamed. For, quite apart from the extreme unlikelihood of his sudden appearance before Moscow, it was almost impossible

to recognize Adam Konski in the ragged, bearded ruffian who stood, slouched but defiant, between two of Ignatius's lancers. Behind him, Diane Auric, equally in rags, equally dirty, had collapsed to the ground and lay unheeded between her guards.

'Uncle!' cried Adam, lurching forward, and swaying on his feet. 'My God! What a piece of luck! I'm your nephew — Adam! Can't you see who I am?' The gladness that had rung in his first cry of recognition faded as suddenly as it had been born under Ignatius's sceptical eye; his voice quivered pitifully. 'Food, and a fire, for the love of Heaven!' he gasped out.

Ignatius took no notice of the appeal. He strode forward and peered into Adam's face. 'Yes, I suppose it is,' he grunted. 'No other man in the army stands so consistently like a herring-gutted rabbit! What the devil are you doing here?' To which Adam's only reply was to follow Diane's example and go down in a heap.

Ignatius prodded his ribs with the toe of his riding boot. But Adam did not move, nor even groan.

'All right — genuine faint,' he muttered. 'Warm them — give them brandy — and then bring them to me!' he threw back over his shoulder to a sergeant as he moved back to the top of the rise. The burning city appalled him, but the sight of it drew him like a

magnet; like the morbid fascination of watching a street accident or a dying man.

His temper had not improved when he faced his nephew again an hour later. 'Might I ask for some explanation of your presence here?' he asked, with that curious assumption of feline politeness which is popularly supposed to be sinister, and seldom succeeds in being other than grotesquely theatrical.

Adam met his uncle's sneering gaze firmly. It was odd how completely one was at the mercy of one's physical body: how a little warmth and a little brandy could put heart into a man, when a short hour before he would gladly have accepted death as a luxurious relief . . . Fortified with that warmth and that brandy the flight from 'The Madman's House' seemed to have no more significance than an evil dream; the escape from the cowed servants, the nights of cold and misery in the woods, the occasional mad galloping rides from Cossack patrols, no more reality than incidents of a nightmare . . . 'You were present when I interviewed Monsieur Kestner, I seem to remember,' he said to Ignatius.

'And he,' snapped the colonel, straddling his legs, and towering over his nephew, 'was good enough to inform me that he had sent you on a secret mission to Moscow.'

At that Adam smiled. 'I am still on my way there,' he said.

Ignatius brought down his riding-whip with a crack against his thigh. 'You grin, do you, you puppy?' he stormed. 'Before God, I had thought you had already sufficiently disgraced our name and our house! I got you this chance to redeem your honour — and I find you skulking here on the tracks of the army like some damned Neapolitan sutler — with a girl!'

Adam's lips worked, but he did not speak.

'Oh, yes, I know,' Ignatius went on brutally. 'Your pretty friend should avoid fainting among curious soldiers who are unused to such genteel exhibitions of frailty — this is a moral army, my dear nephew ——'

Ignatius was enjoying himself, soothing his fretted nerves by deliberately encouraging his outburst of rage. No doubt he would have embroidered the last theme further and still more elaborately. But his sentence broke off suddenly, and his mouth gaped when Adam took a step forward and said in a hard, low voice: 'Another word about Madame Auric, and I'll kill you, though you were my uncle and my superior officer ten times over!'

Ignatius stared. He was as naïvely amazed as he would have been had he been suddenly assaulted in the street by a lady of quality.

'I mean it,' Adam went on. 'The lady is the wife of Captain Auric, my comrade. She was one of our mission. She and her honour are in my care. You can have me shot as a deserter, for all I care! If she is touched by a finger of yours or your men against her will, I shall appeal to the Emperor!'

Ignatius still looked down on his nephew as if he could hardly believe his eyes — eyes in which anger was slowly yielding to a certain amused tolerance. 'Who would have believed it?' he said at last. 'The lady must have steel to have kindled a spark from such damp tinder.' He put a hand on Adam's shoulder. 'What is to prevent me disposing of you out of hand, and doing with her as I please?' he added.

Adam did not flinch. 'Guarding the honour of the Konski name includes murder and rape, then?' he flashed back.

Ignatius nodded complacently. 'Such things have their uses,' he admitted. 'Yes, my nephew, what a little fighting-cock you have become! It quite warms my heart — even in this devil's wind!' He turned away, walked two or three paces, turned abruptly and came back to Adam. 'This is all very well,' he went on. 'I'll admit the girl is your affair! Keep her for all I care! But where the devil is Auric? Why are you here? Where are the results of your mission?'

Adam explained what had befallen 'The Sacred Flies'; but Ignatius Konski did not let him finish the story. He rapped out an oath, and swung round, pointing to the glare in the sky.

'Bungling and folly! While we dripped sweat and blood from Smolensk to Moscow!' he cried. 'Look! Moscow burns, and still we have no word from Alexander! It was Auric's responsibility! Why did he send no information? Where is the fool?'

'He was wounded and a prisoner,' said Adam. 'We hoped to find him in Moscow.'

'Did you?' roared Ignatius. 'Then find him in Moscow you shall! Go and seek him! Take your woman with you, and be damned to you and all your spying kind! Come back without him or news of him, and Kestner shall have you shot unless I do it myself!'

Adam shrugged his shoulders and saluted. 'Frankly, sir,' he replied quietly, 'I expect to find a reception in Moscow warmer than the one we have received at your hands. May I ask for the loan of two horses from your regiment?'

Ignatius nodded, and called to his sergeant. 'Two horses at once!' he ordered. 'And send the second prisoner to me! They ride into Moscow on special service at once.'

He turned back to Adam. 'I hated your father,'

he said, 'and I find you a cub and a fool! But you've pluck after all. Good luck to you both!' Once more he nodded curtly, and strode back towards the top of the rise with a jingle of spurs.

He was still standing there, huge, puzzled, motionless, like the statue of some baffled giant, when Adam and Diane, some ten minutes later, rode down the rough track towards the burning city on a quest as mad and futile as it was hopeless. Adam saluted with a flourish of bravado, but Ignatius either did not see or paid no heed.

'Haven't the English some proverb about the frying-pan and the fire?' said Diane, and laughed rather hysterically.

Adam leaned from his horse and put a steadying hand on her arm. She looked round at him, biting her lip. And as their eyes met, Adam felt confirmation as certain as death of a conviction that had been forming slowly during the last days of mutual flight, peril and despondency: that for Diane and himself the true problem would be faced, not in finding Charles Auric, but if and when they found him.

CHAPTER XIV

THREE MEET

ADAM and Diane did not enter Moscow that night. The latter was almost at the limit of her physical strength. The days and nights of hard riding; the ever-present anxiety — less for herself than for Adam, and for the unknown fate of Charles; indifferent food, and little sleep; all would have killed or crippled any girl less physically hardy, less mentally determined. Her cheeks were drawn, her eyes haggard and circled with fatigue. And, for climax, when at last they had regained touch with the French Army, they had found not safety nor welcome, but Ignatius Konski's stubborn brutality. While, in the hour that had followed her momentary collapse, Diane had needed all her wits and all her courage to cope with the Polish troopers, who in discovering her sex could not believe that they had not also discovered a *vivandière* — for once young and pretty into the bargain — or at least some actress from Paris, following in the wake of the army for purposes too obvious to be worth discussing. She had been very grateful for her pocket-pistol

while Adam had argued and quarrelled with his uncle. . . .

By the time they had ridden under the walls, reaction had set in, and she was lying along her horse's neck, limp, almost unconscious. Above their heads long veils of smoke, magnificently shot with sparks, curled and shredded in monstrous patterns beneath the crimson sky. In their nostrils was the bitter reek of fire; in their ears the gale and the flames roared together like an angry sea. By the deserted Smolensk Barrier they dismounted. In the middle of the road lay a crumpled figure on its face. Adam turned it over. It was the body of a young Russian, emaciated and dirty, pierced through and through with bayonet-thrusts. One lank hand still gripped a burnt-out torch with the futile obstinacy of death. As Adam straightened himself, a woman suddenly ran from behind one of the low stone buildings at the side of the road. She ran bent almost double, witch-like, with a dark veil about her head. Adam saw that she had a knife in her hand.

Diane cried out sharply. But Adam stood still, watching; took one step forward; knocked up the woman's arm with one hand, and caught her wrist with the other. He had a glimpse of a rough, weather-beaten peasant face; of sharp white teeth set in a wolfish snarl; then she let the knife fall, twisted

away from Adam, dropped on her knees by the body, and made the sign of the Cross several times, muttering under her breath.

'He will rise again the Third Day — the Third Day,' she repeated again and again, in the intervals between fervent prayers.

Adam turned away. He knew that superstition of resurrection among the Russian peasantry, and pitied it as such. But the woman's animal concentration, its blend of ferocity and devotion, in such a time and place, awed him; oppressed him with an indefinable sense of evil. Supporting Diane with one arm flung round her shoulders, he led her into that hut in which Napoleon had passed the night before he entered the city. There at last the girl fell asleep, and Adam stood guard over her till the dawn rose behind the cupolas of the city and paled the devouring flames.

When they left the hut, the dead Russian no longer lay across the middle of the road. His corpse had been dragged or thrown aside. But the woman still crouched beside it. This time she did not even glance up as Adam and Diane rode past her and through the Barrier. And in the animalism, the childish faith of her kneeling figure, Adam seemed to see that something native to the Slav — something alike incomprehensible and exasperating to the

West — upon which the steel of the Grand Army could not bite; against which it must ultimately bend, or even break. . . .

They rode on grimly into Moscow with a numb despair settling upon their spirits. Their own personal outlook was bad enough — how could they hope to find Charles Auric in such a place, even if he were still in the city? But to Adam at least the fate of the army and the campaign seemed more ominous still. Discipline had vanished. Soldiers, singly or in groups, were everywhere, wandering aimlessly, or breaking riotously into the silent empty houses to loot. Many were unarmed. Some were fantastically adorned with women's cloaks, or tall fur hats. Frantic officers, trying to restore order, were neither obeyed nor even saluted. In the Great Square before the Kremlin Adam saw a half company of the Guard dicing for a huge pile of fur rugs and gilded church plate — privates and sergeants alike sprawling beside casks of wine, with jewelled swords and daggers from some great house stuck through their belts, and priceless Chinese embroideries slung across their broad shoulders. Unheeded behind them lay the riddled bodies of half-a-dozen incendiaries caught red-handed. Here and there pale-faced staff officers galloped through the street with little squads of picked cavalry, trying to check

the fires. But Rostopchin had done his work well. Every engine had been destroyed, every pump broken. And every hour some fresh band of desperadoes would slink out of the darkness of the cellars where they had lain concealed, and some fresh group of houses would shoot fiery arrows at the sky.

Reining in his horse, Adam stared at the Kremlin. What was the Emperor doing, he wondered? He knew nothing of the superb gesture by which Napoleon, in the midst of that agony of fire, and tumult, and increasing apprehension, chose deliberately that morning to issue a new constitution for the Théâtre Française; chose that place, the Kremlin Palace, from which to date its signature. Already, tiny figures above the swell of the great dome, soldiers of Mortier's command, could be seen sawing at the base of the vast golden cross of Ivan, which was to follow the horses of Saint Mark, the sword of Frederick the Great, to Paris, as a trophy of conquest. But as he watched them, Diane pointed, and cried out. All about them wheeled and flapped a great flock of crows, clamorous and black against the sky.

'Will there be jackals in the streets also?' asked the girl, trying to smile.

'There are,' said Adam bitterly, jerking out one

hand towards a cluster of drunken Italian light-infantrymen, who were deliberately breaking one window after another with musket-shots, singing and yelling, while their comrades stood round them, guzzling and drinking and cheering on the work of wanton destruction.

'Moscow shares the fate of all deserted cities,' muttered Adam. 'Abandoned to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field! What we can do here, only God knows, but I suppose we must ride on.'

So he and the girl, leaving the Kremlin behind them, rode on together, through streets, littered with broken glass from the windows of burning houses, whose gutters already ran with the sluggish streams of what seemed muddy scum, and was in reality the molten lead and copper from the melted roofs. Everywhere they passed were the same scenes of riot, pillage, and the cracking of discipline; and they found it easy, just before midday, to get food and wine from a jovial squadron of Dutch Hussars, holding a carousal in the courtyard of one of the houses where they had succeeded in extinguishing the flames. A fat and bearded lieutenant in charge seemed only too delighted to press food and drink upon passing comrades. He bestrode a gigantic barrel in the entrance to the

courtyard. Beside him were ranged scores upon scores of bottles in steady ranks that would have done credit to the Guard; ranks that slowly diminished as the stolid troopers took them one by one, opened them by the simple method of breaking them at the necks, and flung the emptied bottles carelessly aside.

'You seem to have been in the wars, my friend,' he bellowed heartily at Adam. 'Drink? Drink as you please, and what you can! I give you the Emperor! Emperor of France — of Europe — of China — of the World!' And he rolled drunkenly off the barrel, while his men guffawed and roared with laughter, and clattered their scabbards on the stones of the courtyard.

In fact their welcome was so hearty that Adam and Diane might have been hard put to it to get away. But, like most regiments which still kept their wagons with them, the Dutch Hussars had sent out a party on a looting expedition. Just as the lieutenant's hospitality showed signs of becoming embarrassing in its heartiness, a wagon, top-heavy with furs, silks, vases, plate, wine, and even such fantastic plunder as chandeliers and fire-dogs, was driven into the courtyard. In an instant it was surrounded and boarded by the troopers, shouting, swearing, and even fighting. And Adam took the

opportunity for himself and the girl to get to horse and away. They went on, questioning every officer they met in case Charles Auric had been found; peering into the dead faces of the numerous corpses, fearing a dreadful alternative only too possible in the midst of such chaos. But there was no word nor sign of Charles alive or dead, and Adam every hour felt more convinced of the folly and futility of their errand.

'No,' said Diane, when at last he confessed his utter despondency, 'I do not believe it, Adam. It may not be here — but we shall find him. You'll think me mad, but I know! I loved him, and I know!'

Adam looked at her sharply, but she did not return his gaze. She stared straight before her as though in a vision or a dream. And for the hundredth time Adam caught his breath in the realization of her loveliness. She was almost in rags. Her face and hands were tanned and grimy. Her eyes were tired and swollen. But nothing could spoil the beauty of her features or the grace of her body, as nothing had availed to dim her courage.

Adam flushed crimson from forehead to collar at the daring of his thoughts. But there was to be no further time just then for speculation upon the tender passions. Adam's horse suddenly reared and

lashed out with his forelegs. Adam nearly lost his seat. As he jammed in his knees and recovered, he heard a cry from Diane. She was pointing with a trembling hand, and her face was grey.

'Look!' she cried again. 'Charles!'

A tall man wrapped in a cloak had appeared out of an alleyway perhaps two yards ahead. Now he was running madly, head down, along the street in which Adam and Diane had halted.

'Are you sure?' stammered Adam.

The girl laughed in his face. 'Sure?' she repeated scornfully, and thrust in her spurs.

Adam wrenched up his charger's head and followed her. 'How could you tell? Why should he run?' he shouted, as he drew level with her. She did not reply; merely pointed forward with her whip.

They were at the fugitive's very heels, when he sprang aside, crossed the road in a flash, and vanished into another narrow winding alley.

In a second Adam was down, and thrusting his bridle into Diane's hands, 'Hold the brutes!' he gasped out. 'If it's Charles, I'll bring him to you — only stay here!' And wrenching at the strap which held his sabre, he got it unbuckled, dropped his weapon, and ran up the alley in furious pursuit. Luckily for some fifty yards the street — by courtesy only; it was too narrow for a horse, and stank to

heaven — ran straight. Adam held his quarry in sight, and realized at once that he could slowly overhaul him. He settled grimly to the business of running him down, thanking the gods that he was wearing no spurs. The passage — it was really nothing more — curved and narrowed yet more. For an instant Adam lost sight of the fugitive at a corner. Then he rounded it. He found himself in a lane, uneven and empty, running beside some great palace which he saw afterwards was built of wood, but stuccoed all over, to give the effect of marble. The man in the cloak was beating on a small door in the side of this monstrous building.

For a moment Adam stopped in his tracks to get his breath and take his bearings. He had a glimpse of a white face under a fur cap, a swirl of the black cloak, as the door opened. With a futile yelled command to 'Halt, in the Emperor's name!' he launched himself across the road, only to have the door slammed in his face.

But his blood was up now. He had dropped his sabre, but he still carried his pistols. Drawing one, he blew open the lock. Bolts still held the framework of the door at top and bottom. But Adam charged it bull-like, and burst through at the expense of a bruised shoulder. He found himself at the bottom of a narrow curving flight of stairs. Over-

head sounded a murmur of voices, speaking in French! Adam drew his second pistol and mounted the stairs. Twenty steps or so, and he reached a landing. For an instant he paused there, listening. The sound of voices had ceased. And then suddenly before his eyes a door, with carved panels, slowly opened. 'Will you please to enter?' came a voice — a woman's voice — a voice that Adam knew and shuddered to recognize.

He levelled his pistol and crossed the threshold. He found himself at one end of a long bare *salon*, with tapestried walls and a ceiling richly painted with Olympian goddesses of opulent charms and stupendous nudity. The only furniture was a small inlaid table and a gilt chair. On the table lay a brace of pistols. In the chair sat Anna Ivanovna, 'The Spider.' One hand cupped her smooth firm chin. The other played with the crucifix about her neck. She was smiling. Behind her, his back towards Adam, stood the man in the cloak. His shoulders were heaving convulsively, and his fur cap lay beside him on the stained parquet of the floor. There was a short silence. Then Adam Konski clenched his teeth, raised his pistol, and pulled the trigger. It snapped harmlessly; and, at the little noise, the man he had pursued turned round and faced him. It was Charles Auric.

Adam flung down his useless pistol and stepped forward. 'Charles!' he cried. 'Charles!' But he said no more. His voice died in his throat. For this was Charles — and yet it was not Charles. The blue eyes were dull and lustreless. The lean, hard face had shrunk and softened. The insolent, sensual lips now sagged loosely open. Matted hair straggled limply over the sweating forehead, and an inadequately sprouting beard spoiled the outline of the jaws. It was like some loathsome caricature of Charles Auric's ghost.

To Adam, as he stared, came slowly the realization that the woman was speaking: 'You are welcome,' she said, 'though I fear we cannot entertain you long. This house, like all Moscow, burns tonight. We must burn out vermin from Russia. Nothing less can make her clean again of you and your kind!' A deadly hatred had crept into her voice, but still she smiled. 'Why have you honoured my poor home with a visit? Frankly, I thought you dead!'

Adam flung out his hand towards Charles Auric. 'Charles, what has happened?' he cried desperately. 'What are you doing here?'

Charles Auric did not reply. He seemed hardly to recognize Adam or his presence in the room, and Adam saw with real horror that he kept his eyes

always on Anna Ivanovna: eyes that were soft and fawning like a dog's.

'God, man! Are you drugged or mad?' Adam burst out. 'Don't you know me? Adam Konski! Your wife — Diane — is with me!'

Charles turned his head. A gleam of recognition flashed in his eyes for an instant, and Adam moved forward. But Anna Ivanovna rose and stood facing him, a pistol in each steady hand.

'Go!' she said quietly. 'To you, Charles is dead.'

Charles Auric's head drooped forward on his chest. 'To you, I am dead,' he repeated, picking his words like a child saying a lesson. And his voice was faint and toneless, like a madman's.

'But your wife?' shouted Adam. And into his mind flashed the picture of Diane, obediently holding the horses, straining eyes and ears along that dark winding alley; and the pitiful anticipation in her face . . .

'Charles Auric is dead to the Grand Army,' said Anna Ivanovna. She looked deliberately at Charles, who shivered, and raised his eyes to hers.

'I have been dead some days,' said Charles, and shrank away into a corner of the room, biting his fingers.

Adam stood irresolute, looking from the hateful, smiling woman to the ravaged, twisted face of the

man whom he had admired, and whom now he knew that he hated. He longed to follow the impulse which bade him turn and leave Charles to the living death he seemed to have chosen, to his treachery and his mistress. But he could not. At his elbow was Diane, in spirit if not in flesh. And suddenly, with an impassioned, furious eloquence that amazed him as he spoke, Adam poured out a flood of words, commanding Charles in the name of his Emperor, taunting him with cowardice and treason, even imploring him by his love for his wife, to come to himself, and to play the man. But even as he talked he knew, with a deadly certitude and a certain terrible joy, that words were useless. He might have been addressing a stone wall. Charles only went on biting his nails, and from time to time casting a glance of entreaty at Anna Ivanovna, standing impassive and apparently unhearing, at the table.

At last Adam's voice died away, and a long silence fell, only broken by 'The Spider's' low laugh. 'He is too fine a figure of a man,' she said caressingly, 'to rot in the snow with the rest of you! He is mine!'

Her superb eyes widened. 'As his price, I give you, Adam Konski, your life — for the present! And now — go!'

There was no more to be said; no more to be done. Adam turned away from the two faces, so hideously

set in the masks of their several madnesses, and stumbled down the winding staircase to the door through which he had pursued Charles Auric into the house.

He flung it wide open, eager for fresh air. But even in that hope he was disappointed. Where the alley had gaped, like some dark ravine of the hills, now raged a sea of fire. The air was fiery hot: too hot to breathe. And in the perpetual gale great blazing timbers spun like straws, and crashed and split like bombshells in showers of sparks.

Adam watched for some minutes, in the grip of a fascination that simultaneously dazed and humbled. Then it flashed upon him that beyond that fiery rampart Diane was waiting with the horses. It hardly needed a glance to realize that the alley was impassable. Frantically he tried to take his bearings; to judge direction, allowing for the alley's damnable curves and twistings. Then he ran as he had never run before, under the looming shadow of 'The Spider's' house, and round its corner into unknown streets. And as he ran, he thought he saw the ominous ruddy glow behind the long windows; and he could imagine the sleek tall woman setting torches against her own walls, or watching Charles Auric do so, at her orders.

The fates were kind to Adam that lowering au-

tumn afternoon. Nothing but purest chance and the mercy of God led his footsteps, by streets of which he was utterly ignorant, to a cross-road not far from where he had left Diane.

She was still there, sitting like a centaur, gentling the restive chargers, and gazing steadfastly up the mouth of the alley which gave out only long streamers of smoke, slowly condensing into thick black columns. Adam called out to her as he ran up. She twisted round in her saddle, lips opening, eyes sparkling in quick welcome. But as he approached, that gladness faded from her face, and Adam knew she had looked for another figure over his shoulder — a figure that was not there. But she asked no question, not even when he had swung himself up beside her, and they were cantering back towards the Kremlin. He looked at her sideways. She had stiffened like a ramrod. Her cheeks were white; her teeth clenched. Her pride was invincible. But the misery in her face was beyond mortal endurance.

Adam bent his head and rode nearer to her. 'We were wrong,' he said huskily. 'It was not Charles. Charles is dead.'

Diane swayed. But just as Adam thought she must fall, she recovered herself.

'I had it from that devilish woman's own lips,' added Adam fiercely. 'I was unarmed — she told me — and threw my life in my face!'

He would have continued, but Diane interrupted him. 'I understand,' she said quietly, like a child who is reconciled to a punishment. Adam winced, and silence fell between them in the gathering dusk.

When they came again into the Great Square of the Kremlin it was already dark. There was no moon, and to north and east the invaders saw themselves ringed with tongues of flame that lit up all the sky.

Later that same night, Napoleon, watching the fire from the walls of the Citadel, felt moisture falling upon his bare hands; and against the light of the distant flames saw, tenuous and immediately dissolving, the first snowflakes of the winter. It is said he laughed. 'This abominable climate will cheat the Russians' incendiarism yet!' he muttered to a general who stood beside him.

And in the ranks of his army were two more besides the sentries of his Guard who did not sleep that night, but watched the fury of the conflagration till the morning.

CHAPTER XV

SCOURGES OF GOD

As the door closed behind Adam Konski's back, Charles Auric whipped round and started forward in pursuit. As he did so, he half turned towards Anna Ivanovna, as though expecting encouragement or check. He got neither. He reached the closed door, one hand thrust forward to wrench it open. For a moment he seemed to have recovered himself. His back straightened; his shoulders squared like those of a free man. Somewhere in the depths of his drugged bewildered mind had sprung into existence the conviction that escape lay open to him on the other side of that door. . . .

Anna Ivanovna seemed to have lost all interest, to be completely absorbed in studying the admirable shape of her hands, opened out before her on the inlaid table. She looked up again — with that slow smile habitual to her — only when she heard Charles Auric's nails scrabbling vainly, frantically, upon the carved panels of the door: a door which had no handle; which was closed and opened by a secret spring operated from the table at which she sat. She watched him dispassionately while he clawed

and fumbled with his fingers; struck and beat upon the solid wood with his fists; finally wheeled round, his arms flung wide, as though he had been crucified against it.

'Let me go!' he cried hoarsely. 'Did you hear what he said? My wife is waiting for me! You told me she was dead!'

'And you have sent her a message that you are dead,' said Anna Ivanovna coolly.

Charles writhed. 'Why do you keep me here?' he groaned. 'Who are you?' The woman shrugged her superb shoulders, and beckoned with one slim finger. Charles shook his head.

'As you please. You would be more comfortable in a chair, but stand if you prefer to do so. We have an hour before this house must burn.'

Charles Auric's hands covered his face in a sudden desperate gesture and then dropped limply to his sides.

'I feel as if I had woken after a ghastly nightmare,' he said. He spoke simply and quietly now; and his eyes no longer looked tortured, but only very miserable. 'That you have trapped me — that you have made me a traitor and a coward — I know. My ruin or my death at your hands I could understand. We were enemies. You serve Russia as I served France. The battle to the

strong ——' He paused for a moment as though expecting an interruption, a comment. None came. 'But this damnable alliance between us!' Charles went on. 'This I cannot understand. You could not kill me cleanly. You must dishonour me, body and soul! Why? How could that help you or your country?'

'I need you in my service,' said Anna Ivanovna.

'To serve you as a slave or a stallion!'

She nodded, smiling still. And fury, shame, and despair danced madly through Charles Auric's brain, so that he felt his head must burst.

'Listen to me,' said Anna Ivanovna. 'When you and your friends came to Seidenbrod, I told you that Alexei Geraldin was my brother. That poor lunatic, with his swords and his fencing-masters, was my half-brother. His mother, and mine, was a princess of Turkestan. Before she married the mad Irishman Geraldine, at the age of sixteen she was made the wife of my father. I was their only child. My father died when I was two years old, and a year later my mother married Geraldine.

'You do not know the East, my dear Charles. Though in herself my mother was small, and gentle, and finally an easy victim to the drunken fury of a madman, there was a great tradition and royal blood in her. She — and I — come of a people who

live in the saddle, and whose currency is their captives. Our stallions and our slaves are to us what Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity are to you! We live by the former. We are realists. You live by the latter. You are romantically sentimental theorists. Is it so strange that East and West should fail to understand each other?

'Your revolution,' she went on, 'was a theft of the privilege of the East: the great privilege of destruction! It is from the East that have come, from time immemorial, the Scourges of God: Attila, Genseric, Timur, and Jenghiz Khan, whose blood runs in my own veins. It has been ours to kill! To burn and to destroy the cluttering refuse of western civilizations grown overripe! Rome, Belgrade, Constantinople! And now you petty Gauls, with your easy phrases, your cheap songs, and your absurd Italian general, take it upon yourselves to defy kings and armies: to try to weld together an Empire of Europe! No! Invasion is like the sun: it moves inexorably and inevitably from east to west. So it has always been, and so it shall be again to-day. You have tempted the East, and the East shall answer you through me! For, though I am a woman, yet my ancestors ruled in Bokhara and Samarcand, and carried the horse-tail standards to the gates of Vienna. You think you wage war against Alexander. But you are wrong.

You are fighting me, and behind me half the world! You are fighting the stars in their courses! You are challenging the Scourges of God!'

She ceased suddenly. And Charles realized with a certain horror that her gaze was no longer fixed upon him: that her eyes were looking out, beyond the tapestried walls, and the fires of Moscow, to the desolation of the steppes; the grass-lands and the deserts of Turkestan, with their horses and their dromedaries; out to that tangle of giant peaks and ice-bound plateaux where some say the human race was cradled, and where Russia, India, and China stand face to face in the gorges of the Pamirs. Those far-seeing, steadfast eyes of hers were not human. They were the eyes of a fanatic — of a woman both mad and bad. But also they were the eyes of a woman who was great. Her creed might be damnable and bloody, but her belief in it was absolute, rising from a conviction in her very soul. And Charles, whose limited imagination had only conceived of Napoleon as a more successful edition of himself, saw France as parochial, and the Emperor as a tawdry adventurer, beside Anna Ivanovna's great canvas of the overwhelming spaces and boundless peoples of the East ranked for their unrelenting westward march. There had been something magnificently virile, something splendid and untamed,

in that upheaval of the French people, which had broken the kings and the armies of eighteenth-century Europe; in the cheering mobs of raw recruits who had carried Wattignies and won Jemappes with their bayonets, their courage, and their songs; who now as veterans saw Moscow burn. But to Charles Auric, his immature mind gripped and swayed by this Russian woman's fanatical personality, the great French eastward drive appeared a smaller thing: a movement based on the theories of bourgeois dreamers, drunken with conceit of their own thoughts; a moment exploited by a parvenu soldier of fortune, born out of time, to carry him to an imperial throne.

Type that he was of the perpetual adolescent, Charles Auric required a master: some personality to serve beside the crude idol of his own ambition. He had found him in the little Corsican. But in Anna Ivanovna's eyes Napoleon was not only an enemy but a sham; not only utterly hateful, but also utterly ridiculous. And behind her Charles now felt the presence of the unnumbered millions, the quiet remorseless fatalism, the supreme conviction of ultimate triumph of the East.

'We are born old in Turkestan,' went on 'The Spider' dreamily. 'We have seen so many wars, so many people who come and go — how can we fail to

watch Europe with a certain pity? You are so young, so sentimentally violent, so enthusiastic. You fight and struggle. We watch and wait. For with us is destiny, and with you is only confusion. Believe me or not as you please. It does not matter, for you could not leave me now even if you would. You are mine — till death. Yet it should console you, Charles, to know that riding with me you will follow the rising sun, when, but for me, you would have died with a falling star!'

Charles nodded listlessly. All effect of Adam Konski's unexpected visit had vanished. Once more he was a puppet, his strings between 'The Spider's' fingers; his vitality drawn from her, his mind attuned most subtly to hers. Faintly through the closed and barred windows some French cavalry trumpets sounded the alarm, as another group of houses burst into flame; that harsh exhilarating sound that brings with it the open country, fierce comradeship, and swords. Charles did not even turn his head. 'And now?' were his only words.

'The Spider' nodded. 'Yes, that will serve for explanations and for rant!' she said grimly. 'We have work to do. Napoleon must not leave Russia alive. He must retreat. That is certain. And he must retreat by Wilno. But peace has been made with Turkey, and Tshitshagov is marching north

with sixty thousand men. We must divert him to the Beresina. If he catches the Corsican there in his retreat, the gate is shut, and the war is ended. You and I, my friend, ride south to carry his orders to Tshitshagov to-morrow. By the delivery of those orders we shall make history together, and at the Beresina we shall have our reward!'

Once again for a few seconds her eyes left Charles's haggard face to vision the future. And as he went closer to her, it flashed absurdly across Charles's mind that so Jeanne d'Arc might have looked, calm, sure, inhuman, and inspired — had she been possessed by devils.

CHAPTER XVI

A CHANCE SHOT

About noon of the day following his dreadful meeting with Charles Auric and 'The Spider,' Adam entered the Kremlin to report himself to Kestner. He went ill at ease, and with a heavy heart; for he had nothing to report but failure, and nothing to tell but a story which he hardly dared expect the Alsatian to credit. As he looked back along the road he had travelled with Diane — from Wilno to 'The Madman's House,' from 'The Madman's House' to Moscow — he could hardly believe that it had been he, Adam Konski, who had thus astonishingly adventured. In this weary limping figure, who had come to know the bitterness of failure, the despair of love, the sensations of fighting and slaughter, of utter weariness and supreme disillusionment, he entirely failed to recognize the unsophisticated boy who had run away from the castle of Konski so full of high ideals, of generous aspirations, and, if the truth be told, of crass ignorance concerning men, women, and the world.

Frankly, the thought of his coming interview with the Alsatian sickened him. But to some extent this

was balanced by the realization that, for the present at least, Diane was in safe hands. By a supreme stroke of good fortune she had met that morning in one of the streets leading to the Kremlin a lady of uncertain age, whom she had known in Paris as an old friend of her father the Marquis. Madame Brune was a character. Once — in pre-revolutionary days — she had been a famous beauty, though of plebeian stock, which both enabled and encouraged her to transfer her favours from aristocrats to successful revolutionaries without any *arrière-pensée*; with, in fact, the justification that she was rewarding the avengers of her honour, since she had been the victim, albeit reasonably willing, of a noble lieutenant in the King's Guard at the age of sixteen. Ultimately she married a certain Georges Brune, an elderly connection of the general of the same name, who possessed much money and no proprietary instinct: a combination which suited his wife admirably, generous as she was in more senses than one. He had died in 1806. The widow then took a kindly interest in the persons and careers of a series of handsome young men. As her charms began to fade, so her attachments increased in intensity. So that in 1812, when her lover of the moment was ordered to Russia, she went with him in an enormous yellow barouche, with a vast quantity of toilet accessories

under its cushioned seats, and three spaniels in her lap. It is melancholy to record, in contrast to such an exhibition of loyalty, that the young man who inspired it was faithless at every opportunity in every town upon the march; and finally was mortally wounded at Borodino, dying in her arms, but with another woman's name upon his lips, consistently tactless to the last.

Madame Brune, however, survived this shock, as she had survived so many others. Peculiarly susceptible to surface emotionalism, and given to screaming, to oaths, and even to brandy, she nevertheless preserved her vital forces intact. She was tall and strong as a grenadier, with a red wig, an enormous beaked nose, and the jaw and teeth of a small horse. Her eyes were fine — her best feature. But with her painted cheeks — and she was no artist in colours! — her huge hands and feet, her plucked eyebrows, and hearty laugh, she was an alarming figure of a woman: so alarming as to be perfectly safe even in the midst of the Grand Army, which in matters of sex was not as a rule inclined to be fastidious about looks or age.

For all her grotesque appearance, and her amorous extravagances, Madame Brune was good-hearted and affectionate. This Diane knew. She suspected also, with a suspicion amounting to certainty, that

Madame Brune held most intimate memories of her father the Marquis — among so many others — in her capacious bosom. Upon that bosom, accordingly, Diane flung herself, to be most gladly received, once Madame Brune had recovered from the inevitable disappointment of finding her to be the daughter of an old friend, and not the handsome young officer indicated by the uniform she still wore, now considerably the worse for hard usage. And Adam, amazed though he was by the lady's appearance, had been far too worried by the question of Diane's safe disposal, to quarrel with the sudden arrival out of the blue of so obviously efficient a chaperone. He was shocked, though, when Madame Brune said with a happy laugh, 'They will think I have another young lover — that I am heartless in forgetting Lucien so soon! Well, let them think! For years I have been called an old fool — and other names! But I enjoy my life!' She then addressed herself to Adam. 'Run along, young man!' she snapped. 'I'll look after her till bedtime!'

He had turned away quickly to hide an irrepressible blush, and had not been pleased to hear Diane, as well as the old lady, laughing at him. . . .

Anyway, Diane was in safe hands — that was the great thing, thought Adam, as he followed a

sentry through the passages of the Kremlin. It was so typical of Kestner to have chosen a room in the very heart of the palace, only to be attained through a maze of corridors, and down one staircase after another, winding, narrow, sinister.

The Alsatian was preparing for a journey. Clothes, papers, books, saddle-bags, flasks, and pistols covered floor, chairs, and tables. When Adam entered, Kestner hardly bothered to look up, and he let his salute pass unacknowledged. He stood in a corner, burning papers deliberately in an empty hearth, holding them one by one to a candle-flame. His eyes were abstracted and yet wary, like a half-tamed animal's, his brows furrowed, his jaw clamped and brutally out-thrust.

Adam began to make a report, but Kestner cut him short. 'I've no time to listen to stories of failure,' he barked suddenly. 'You have failed — that is enough! I am attending His Majesty at once, and you will come with me! He is displeased with me, with "The Sacred Flies." He dislikes failure. You may explain yourself to him — if you can!'

Adam tried to swallow the lump that had suddenly risen in his throat. He did not succeed. The prospect was terrifying. At that moment he would gladly have changed places with Charles Auric, or ridden straight upon the muzzles of a battery

in position, rather than face those cold, pale eyes which he remembered from that dawn beside the Niemen. How cold the wind had been through his shirt! And once more in his thoughts he wore the Emperor's tunic, the Emperor's star upon his breast. With that memory his courage came back to him.

'At your service,' he said firmly, to the Alsatian's unresponsive back. And when at last he followed Kestner to the Emperor's suite, he was as much excited by, as he was apprehensive of, the prospective interview.

Excitement and apprehension were alike unwarranted by the event. Napoleon hardly noticed Adam Konski at all. He stood, his hands clasped behind him, at a window, looking out at the great smoke-clouds drifting above the city. Kestner spoke a few words low in his ear. The Emperor twitched a shoulder sharply. 'You're a fool!' he said loudly, but without turning round. 'Why should an untrained boy make a good spy? Because he was a bad soldier? You reason like an imbecile!' Kestner whispered again persistently. Napoleon struck one hand smartly against the other, and swung round. He was very pale. 'Kestner, you are an even greater fool than I had thought! This morning you saw the casualty returns — and you would have me add to

them. If the boy has no brains, he has legs and arms! Am I to use my soldiers to shoot each other, while there are still Russians?'

Kestner drew back scowling, and bowed.

'Send him back to his regiment!' ended Napoleon impatiently. 'I have other things to think of!' And he turned back to the window.

With that grateful order, 'Send him back to his regiment!' ringing in his ears, Adam could bear with equanimity the Alsatian's jeers and black looks. The Polish Light Horse were out with Murat's force, reconnoitring the southward roads. And within three hours, with five troopers, rejoining after slight wounds, Adam was riding clear of the city, head and heart high with the pride of being at last an officer leading his men. That pride not even the thought of Diane, which now never left him, could blur. In a queer way the two feelings were inextricably mingled. That they should be so Adam was well content, and for once he sat almost erect in his saddle. Madame Brune would take care of Diane. And with a sword at his side, and a horse between his knees, Adam felt perfectly capable of taking care of himself. Not even the thought that he was going back under the orders of his uncle Ignatius depressed him unduly. For Ignatius, though appallingly formidable in the flesh, was losing importance

in Adam's eyes, whenever the nephew was far enough removed from him to see him in perspective, to escape the physical oppression of Ignatius's height and breadth of shoulders, of his single eye and scarred face. Besides, returning to Ignatius meant returning to Nimrod: Nimrod, who had saved both his life and Diane's in their flight from 'The Madman's House,' and whom he had left with Ignatius's squadron, when he had borrowed a fresh mount and ridden into Moscow at his uncle's orders. It would be good to see the horse again . . . And Adam made mental comparisons very flattering to Nimrod as he looked at the beasts that carried his men and himself: underfed, weary, with dull eyes and drooping heads. Even from his experience of horses at the Konski castle, Adam could tell that the horse-mastery of the cavalry of the Grand Army was incredibly casual, almost non-existent. Through campaign after campaign horses were ruthlessly used up and remorselessly cast aside. But in Italy and Germany remounts were always to be had. In Russia it was another story; and even before Borodino there were many squadrons marching dismounted, and many carcases lining the roads from the West.

Adam's orders were to rejoin his regiment somewhere down the old road from Moscow to Kaluga.

He and his little troop were about halfway along that road, a few miles north of Borovsk, when the trooper riding ahead suddenly pulled in his horse and cried out, pointing away to the left. Adam spurred forward. Rapidly approaching the road was a small cavalcade — seven or eight riders, apparently civilian. Adam watched them curiously. They came from the enemy flank, but they seemed quite unperturbed by the sight of the French patrol, and closed in on the road at a steady trot. Adam closed up his men, and rode out alone to meet them.

Immediately one of the newcomers also galloped forward, a white handkerchief fluttering in his hand: a big burly fellow, obviously Russian, with narrow Tartar eyes, his bearded face pitted with smallpox scars. He saluted Adam clumsily, and held out a paper.

Adam took it and looked it over. It was a safe-conduct through the French lines for eight persons, signed by Kestner, and sealed with the Imperial seal; perfectly in order.

Wondering a little — but humiliatingly aware that here was something quite outside his business, even to the extent of speculation — Adam handed it back with a polite bow. Meanwhile the other Russians had steadily come nearer, and, as Adam straightened himself in his saddle, and gathered up

his reins, he glanced at them, casually enough. Then his jaw dropped, and for an instant he sat absolutely rigid. For among this party, franked by Kestner's pass, he saw Anna Ivanovna, 'The Spider,' in a great fur cloak, and at her elbow the white face of Charles Auric.

The recognition was mutual. Adam yelled at his lancers, who were halted on the road perhaps fifty yards behind him, and wrenched at his holsters. But his horse, nervous at feeling all grip on the reins loosened, jibbed and passaged sideways; and the big Russian with the paper seized the golden moment, thus offered him by good fortune, to double his fist and strike Adam savagely under his left ear. It was as effective as if he had used a hammer or a mace. Adam was only conscious of a violent shock to his jaw — so sudden, so heavy that he had no time to feel pain. Before his nerves could carry any message to his brain, that brain was unconscious. He went over like an empty sack, striking the ground heavily with his head, and lay still.

His troopers were already in movement, but, seeing Adam fall, they raised a fierce yell, and spurred their jaded chargers into a gallop. But it was a vain effort. 'The Spider's' mind was on the dispatches she carried for Tshitshagov and Tourmassov — the orders which should trap Napoleon at the Beresina.

Her escort were well mounted. She felt she had neither time nor inclination for an unprofitable skirmish. And for Adam Konski's fate she cared not a straw, though it irritated her — fretted her with a certain ridiculous foreboding — that Fate should have brought him once again across her path.

She wheeled her party away from the charging Poles, outriding them with defiantly contemptuous ease along the arc of a complete semi-circle; gained the crossing of the Kaluga road, and cantered away southwards. The tiny incident had occurred fittingly just to point what might well be the climax of her career — her successful passage of the French lines, with, against her left breast, the package which carried in its sealed and folded parchment the utter destruction of the Grand Army. She turned to Charles Auric with a gay laugh as they cleared the road, and for the first time he saw her with calm eyes, no longer burning and tortured with that consuming fanaticism of destruction which had possessed and driven her so long, so tirelessly. She looked happy.

But, as it chanced, the platitude that history is made up of countless trivial and utterly haphazard details was to be justified once more. The Poles had ridden in furious pursuit, their anger rising as their chances of catching up with the enemy dimin-

ished. All five had wounds they longed to pay back with interest upon Russian bodies. And now they had been, as they thought, outwitted by treachery and the white flag — and by civilians at that!

As Anna Ivanovna and her escort drew farther and farther ahead, out-distancing the wretched horses of the pursuit, one of the Polish troopers rapped out a great oath, halted, leaped to earth, and opened fire with his pistols. His comrades followed his example. It was an utterly fantastic performance — a mere exhibition of baffled rage. The range was long, the chance of a hit absurdly remote. Yet one of those chance bullets went home. Charles Auric saw Anna Ivanovna reel in her saddle.

The Poles saw no more of their enemy. For all that they could see, their shots had been as futile as their charge. The Russians disappeared in the cover of a distant wood. Four of the lancers rode back to their officer. One trotted after the fugitives in the vague hope of coming across some fresh patrol and renewing the chase. But there was no sign of any Frenchman within sight, and about a quarter of a mile beyond the road he halted. A dark square object in the grass caught his eye. It was a package, heavily sealed, wrapped in a limp square of untanned leather. And the leather was soaked with fresh blood.

When he rejoined the rest of his troop, he found Adam Konski just recovering his senses, but apparently raving in delirium. He poured out a stream of wild phrases about 'The Spider,' and 'a Frenchman with her.' Had they caught them? Had they failed? They must be ridden down and taken! . . .

The Poles looked at each other in honest, uncomprehending bewilderment. Then that trooper who had first fired his pistols, and who had been last to abandon the pursuit — a townsman, not a peasant like the others, and accordingly of livelier intelligence — assumed spokesmanship for the rest. As far as he could see the officer had been knocked silly by that crack on the head, and was badly hurt; if his mind wasn't set at rest he might well go mad; besides, it wasn't to the credit of any of them that the Russians had got clear away . . . 'They scattered and bolted, sir,' he said, speaking soothingly, and bending low over Adam, so that the others should not see his face. 'Most escaped, but we got two: a woman and a Frenchman. Carrying dispatches, they were! Look here, sir!' And he pulled out the blood-stained package.

Adam raised himself on his elbow and grabbed frantically for it. 'Dead!' he gasped. 'You're certain? A woman, and a Frenchman?'

The trooper nodded, and turned his face away to

wink warningly at his comrades. 'Dead as mutton, sir!' he repeated, with an air of solid satisfaction. 'I took this from the woman's body! Two lucky shots!'

Adam fell back. 'Charles — poor lucky devil, after all!' he muttered. 'I can't rejoin like this. You must take me back to Moscow. This package must go to the Emperor.'

The agony of pain wrenched at his jaw, and seemed to stab upwards and sideways through his aching head, and, still muttering disjointedly of 'The Spider' and 'Charles,' he relapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XVII

DEATH IN THE WOODS

In a miserable hut, standing alone in a clearing among pine trees, Anna Ivanovna lay, waiting for death. She lay quite still on a heap of straw, covered by her great fur cloak. But for the sweat upon her forehead, and occasional convulsive swallowings of her throat, she might have been asleep: her eyes were closed; her expression utterly tranquil. The quiet fatalism of the East had come to possess a body which now was but a ruined house for fanaticism. When first she felt the blow of her mortal wound, it was inconceivable to her that it had happened, so intent and fixed were her purpose and her mission. That stern mentality held her firmly seated on her horse, until she and her escort were safe in the shelter of the woods. Only then had the outraged flesh won its delayed victory. The Polish trooper's chance pistol-bullet had entered her body just below the corner of the left shoulder-blade, and lodged there. The most superficial examination was enough to pronounce the verdict of a slow and agonizing death.

Her Russians carried her into the wretched peas-

ant hut that alone promised shelter from the persistent gale: the gale under which Moscow still burned; the gale to which the melancholy pines bent their dark heads, swaying rhythmically against the dreary sky, whitish-grey now with the promise of snow. The hut was deserted, and empty of everything but straw. But they made a wood-fire, and spread their cloaks over the straw, and waited. There was nothing more that any of them could do.

Only Charles Auric, his face distorted with horror and bitterness, could not wait quietly. He paced to and fro, biting his fingers, and asking futile unanswerable questions of the stolid moujiks. The latter stood in silence, grave, illimitably patient. These flat-faced, broad-shouldered men, serfs from generations past, had lived all their lives too close to one of the fundamentals of life, the Earth, to be awed by another fundamental, Death. Birth and Death, Food and Sleep — these were the things they knew and respected. They came to all in God's time. Now Death had come close to their mistress, Anna Ivanovna. And out of respect, curiously mingled, to her and to Death, who is the inevitable prince of this world, their life must pause until she died. Only their leader, the giant who had struck down Adam Konski, showed something in his face beyond respect and resignation. There were tears

in his eyes, and his thick lips grimaced grotesquely. He began to pray aloud, until Anna Ivanovna opened her eyes and checked him.

'No, my friend,' she whispered. 'I will speak for myself, if needs must, when the time comes.' She paused, breathing quickly, smiling a little. 'Charles!' she said.

Charles Auric crossed the hut and stood looking down on her. He would have sworn, only an hour earlier, that this woman was his evil genius — a vampire who had drugged his body and damned his soul. Now he could see nothing beyond a woman, cruelly hurt, lying helpless, and facing death with a smile; a woman with whom he had lived, whose food he had eaten, whose bed he had shared — for all that he had done these things at her instance and under her compulsion. He saw her no longer as vile; only as pitiful, and very terribly alone. To hate or condemn her was as futile, as impossible, as to save her. She was beyond aid, but also beyond human judgment.

'So, Charles, your service ends. I am sorry,' she whispered, staring up at him. Her glorious eyes were already thinly filmed, a little dull. 'You can follow your own road now.' She stretched out a wavering hand towards him. And with a queer feeling of defiance he took it between his own. 'You are

strong,' she went on. 'Yes, you were a good choice. I wronged you, I suppose. But I regret nothing. All my life I have desired two things: power and the bodies of men. I have taken and enjoyed them as I pleased. And I was right.'

She paused a moment, as though to gather strength. When she spoke again her voice was clearer. 'How else should I have lived in such a world? Men and women are brave, it seems to me, in accepting life at all on such conditions as they are granted. At any moment everything, fame, power, love, happiness, the world itself of sky, and wind, and grass, may be taken away by a trifle — by a fragment of lead directed by a fool; by a fall in the dark; by the bite of a mad dog; by something utterly insignificant and inexplicable. We live with death always at our elbows. It is insane!'

She broke off and closed her eyes again. Charles felt her hands growing moist and cold in his grasp. 'It is as mad to live, as it is mad to fear a death which is our constant neighbour!' she gasped out suddenly.

Her body writhed horribly in a spasm of pain. She bit her painted lips so fiercely that a thread of blood trickled down her chin. Her eyes opened. And then Charles knew that in reality she was unspeakably, unendurably afraid; for the first time he saw her face

without its mask, and it was the face of a child frightened at the approaching dark. Her breath came in hard rasping pants. Her hands jerked away from his and rose to fumble helplessly at her throat.

Charles longed to turn away. But he could not. Anna Ivanovna had been to him something between god and devil: a compound of ice and fire, subject to no ordinary mortal ills. This picture of her ultimate surrender to panic at the point of death completely fascinated his eyes, even while it wrung his nerves almost beyond endurance.

The struggle could not last. The gasping breath changed to a harsh rattle. The staring eyes rolled upwards. The whole body was contorted by one violent sideways movement. The mouth sagged open. And so 'The Spider' died — at the climax of her career, at the peak of her life, and under the pitying gaze of her last victim.

With an unsteady hand Charles Auric automatically crossed himself and turned away. Except for their leader the Russians were on their knees, muttering prayers. As the Frenchman moved away from the body of his mistress, the big moujik stepped forward. The dog-like devotion had left him now; an equally dog-like ferocity glared out of his broad face at Charles, and snarled from behind his bared

teeth. And one hand crept to the leather belt at his waist, where hung a heavy knife.

Five minutes before, and any stupid peasant could have stabbed Charles through and through; unresisted, almost welcomed, in the act. But now Anna Ivanovna was dead, and with her dying the spell that had bound Charles had lost its power. His old life was stealing back into his brain. His blood was beginning to run warmly in his veins. The man and the soldier were returning to the dwelling which the seven devils had at last left empty.

Charles was unarmed, but he faced the tall moujik calmly, even contemptuously. He straightened his bowed shoulders, settled the hang of his cloak, put his fur cap deliberately under his left arm, and walked straight towards the door of the hut. There followed half a minute of suspense, while Charles moved, looking straight in front of him, and the peasant grunted, and fumbled with his knife-hilt. Then the latter gave way. Charles pushed open the creaking door, and walked out into the gale.

Once in the shelter of the encircling trees, he looked back over his shoulder. The moujik stood in the doorway, threatening and huge. He swung up one arm, and the knife flashed and sang across the clearing, and buried its blade at Charles Auric's feet

among the falling leaves. 'Go to your own people!' a great voice thundered above the wind. And in his turn sheer panic terror seized upon Charles.

He ran madly to where the horses had been left tethered, flung himself wildly upon the nearest saddle; and galloped, hell for leather, out of the wood into the solitude and desolation of the plains. He thought neither of a present goal, nor of the chances of the future; only of how most speedily to set mile upon mile between himself and that accursed hut wherein Anna Ivanovna had known and shown fear for the first and last time.

CHAPTER XVIII

VIA DOLOROSA

It was Monday the 19th of October when orders came to the Guard to march at dawn. From that morning dated the great retreat: it did not become so until after the failure to carry Malojaroslavetz, when the movement south against Kutusoff faded into the dreadful simplicity of retreat westward along the way by which the advance had been made: Borodino, Smolensk, Wilno. It will always be disputed as to what caused Napoleon's decision at last to evacuate Moscow — on a brilliant day of sunshine, when the advent of the winter seemed denied by a return of warmer weather; when the fire had burnt itself out, and the morale and discipline of the Grand Army were beginning to be reëstablished.

The previous day the Emperor had reviewed his Third Army Corps under Ney in the Great Square of the Kremlin. As he rode, rather abstractedly, perhaps, along their steady lines, and distributed promotions and decorations with a lavish hand, there growled and rumbled in the distance the sound of cannon, distant and menacing. Then, as the parade was ending, two mounted men galloped into

the Square on lathered, flagging horses. One was an aide of Murat's: he brought the news of Platoff's sudden attack on Murat's cavalry, which marked the breaking of the armistice with the Russians, and of the desperate fight which had carried the French force of observation through their surrounding attacks. The second messenger was one of Adam Konski's Polish troopers. And he handed to the Emperor the packet of dispatches which had fallen from Anna Ivanovna's bosom, when she first reeled under the impact of the bullet that killed her.

Whether the attack on Murat, or the discovery of those orders to Tshitshagov, caused the decision to be taken is immaterial. But that evening the decision was made. And the next morning Napoleon, his escort shouting and beating a passage for him with the flats of their sabres, pushed through the confusion — mustering battalions, wagons and hand-carts suddenly pressed into the service of the limitless loot, cavalry dismounted and mounted, pedlars, peasants, sutlers, and stragglers, swearing, fighting, hurrying through the streets between the rows of charred houses — to lead the advance on Kaluga by that road to the south along which Adam Konski had ridden to his last meeting with 'The Spider.'

In the midst of that fantastic exodus, which

appeared rather as the migration of a people than the movement of an army, towered and swayed several of the private carriages still retained by the wealthier officers for the transport of their women and their private plunder, the wine, the silks, and furs, which they had chosen in the sack. Among them went Madame Brune's yellow carriage. And in the carriage, huddled painfully in the company of the old lady's spaniels, her toilet-boxes, and Diane, sat Adam Konski, his head aching most damnably, his bruised and swollen jaw carefully bandaged.

He remained in the yellow carriage, weak almost to the point of collapse, falling occasionally into a fevered sleep broken by hideous nightmares and occasional delirium, and tended by those two strangely assorted women, for more than a week: the week in which the advance on Kaluga was foiled, and at last the Grand Army turned its face fixedly towards the west. It was on the day when the French passed back across the battlefield of Borodino, where they had fought and won seven weeks before, that Adam again could set foot to the ground. In spite of Diane's pleading, and of Madame Brune, who roundly called him a young fool for his pains, he left the carriage and plunged into the marching ranks in search of his regiment. It was of course an entirely vain effort. The army covered miles and

miles of open land, moving slowly in dark irregular parallel columns of men, wagons, and guns, and marching for the most part in a strange and unnatural silence as it crossed the place where forty thousand dead men lay, the majority still unburied.

Ignatius and his lancers were far away in the front of the columns with the Emperor. But Adam found something which enabled him to endure his isolation, and all the horrors of the aftermath of the battlefield. He found, quite by chance, a trooper straggled from the light cavalry, riding Nimrod; and so, at the small expense of rough-tonguing a coward, he got back his charger. And it was on Nimrod's back that he rode past the great redoubt, and through the ghastly confusion of the bodies of men and horses, rusting swords still clenched in the skeletons of hands, sodden uniforms and saddlery, and all the loathsome atmosphere of decay.

That night he succeeded in finding his uncle in bivouac. It was the first night when snow fell heavily. And the winter, coming belatedly that year from the frozen steppes of Asia, at last caught up the invaders. The cold came suddenly, masked with an advance-guard of fog, blanketing the bivouac-fires from each other's light, and for the first time killing men quietly as they slept.

Ignatius was not asleep when Adam found him. His men said of him that on service he never closed his single eye. Adam, searching blindly from one camp-fire to another, leading Nimrod, almost blundered into his uncle standing by his horse-lines. Ignatius, wrapped in his white cloak, was staring gloomily at the horses and cursing the snow. He had lost fifteen more chargers that day, and his regiment was dwindling almost as he watched it. Pole that he was, he knew something of the north — unlike the majority of the officers of an army chiefly French and Italian — and behind the scurries of snow and the icy wind he felt the whole strangling grip of winter tightening daily about the army's weakening throat. Without the imagination or ability to express it in words, Ignatius foresaw catastrophe that night. And, since he was incapable of fear, he had left his officers and sought the dumb company of his horses, sullen, sleepless, hopeless, and indefatigable.

He showed no emotion of any sort at Adam's reappearance. He seemed, and indeed was, infinitely more concerned about the relation of his horse-lines to the direction of the bitter wind. But when Adam spoke of 'rejoining for service,' Ignatius shook his head.

'You're an invalid, apparently,' he said. 'You've

been proved incompetent. My men furnish His Majesty's escort on alternate days — I've no use for you!'

Adam winced. 'I am rejoining by the Emperor's own order!' he cried.

Ignatius shrugged his shoulders. 'I choose my own officers,' he said bluntly. 'Frankly, nephew Adam, I neither like you nor trust you. You know it. I see your father in you, and in seeing you, I am forced to remember the one scene in my life I wish to forget ——'

He broke off. But already he had said enough. The murder was out. The memory which had lain hidden so long in the minds of both uncle and nephew — Jan Konski's death at his own hand — had at last been dragged into the light of common speech. As though the ghost of Jan had risen between them, neither man could face the other's eyes. And both were afraid, as though that stubborn and pathetic phantom of a vanished age demanded, from son and brother alike, the price of blood.

But Ignatius, toughened swashbuckler that he was, was not the man to be impressed for more than an instant by the dead past, however grisly its shape. He jerked up his head as if throwing from his shoulders a material burden.

'It's clear that we cannot serve together,' he said;

and added abruptly, 'Where is that woman of yours?'

Adam kept his temper. 'Madame Auric is with the wagon-train,' he replied quietly.

'No doubt,' continued Ignatius, 'she would appreciate your continued escort.'

'Thank you,' said Adam. 'I prefer not to give you further and better opportunities for sarcasm at my expense.' Ignatius frowned. Then he grinned. 'There are moments ——' he began. 'No! Report yourself to Major Jerzmanowski! His squadron is with the rear-guard — the Third Corps of Marshal Ney. And I hope to God I never see you again!'

Adam saluted, and swung himself up onto Nimrod's back. Then he looked round, but his uncle had already turned away, and now stood as before brooding over his horse-lines.

Adam, bending his head against the snow and wind, urged his horse through the foggy darkness towards the rear of the army. His body was cold, but his mind seethed furiously, with mingled hatred, envy, and a most unwilling admiration of Ignatius, who could, so calmly, so practically, thus doom an inconvenient relative to almost certain death, and proceed forthwith to the ordinary problems of horse-mastery in bad weather.

So the retreat went on. Adam, now at last ac-

cepted with open arms as a fighting man and an officer in Jerzmanowski's battered squadron, began to see something of the pursuit. He and his handful of light horse were on perpetual duty, covering or flanking the rear-guard. And one dull wind-scourged day after another he watched from his saddle small moving blobs, fringed with lances, very black against the continually whitening plains; the little troops of Cossacks, an ever-present reminder of peril, drifting and wheeling out of range of musketry or charge; silent, persistent, terrible.

Yet where the Cossacks only exasperated and threatened, the advancing winter, unchecked by that prestige which still clung to the French arms from a hundred victories, swooped falcon-wise straight upon its stumbling prey. The snowflakes skirmishing before it, the wind howled and struck day after day through the shrinking ranks of the Grand Army, leaving the story of its gradual triumph written across the snow in dead men and horses, wagons and limbers, the loot of Moscow, half-eaten carcases, guns that had lost a wheel or their teams, and extinguished campfires. And day after day Adam strained his eyes in fear and anticipation for the sight of Madame Brune's yellow carriage lying abandoned in some drift, with the inevitable message that the indomitable old lady and Diane Auric had joined the

unhappy press of non-combatants and sick, which straggled formlessly and afoot in the gap between the main army and the rear-guard. Every drop of blood in his veins cried out to him to leave his unit; to join that inchoate struggling crowd in which each individual's separate identity was lost, his private business and his original rank and regiment disregarded; to find the yellow carriage, and live or die beside it. Charles Auric was dead. Fate had made Adam's story true. There was nothing now to keep him from Diane's side and Diane's love — nothing but his childhood's dream of 'being a soldier.' Yet the dream proved stronger. It had come true. And though it had materialized in retreat, disaster, cold, hunger, and battle against odds, instead of in victory and decorations, the dream bound him to Jerzmanowski and his lancers with an unbreakable chain. Adam did not know it, but Diane's love was fighting not only an ideal of his own cherished from boyhood, but past generations of Konskis, none of whom had ever died in his bed: a grim line of Polish nobles, born and bred in the tradition that war was one of the few occupations worthy of a gentleman, who set the honour of regiment and flag beside the personal honour of their house. However ill they had lived, the Konskis had never failed to know how to die. And as long as his squadron remained in

being, and he could sit a horse, so long would Diane look back vainly from the yellow carriage for his coming, and Madame Brune would adjure her with cheerful oaths to shut the window, and generalize after her fashion concerning the abysmal folly and pig-headedness of all young men. . . .

Had he only known, Adam could have spared himself much of his anxiety. Soldiers — whether they be French or Germans, Englishmen or Poles — show certain unvarying characteristics. They take pleasure in indulging the obvious desires of the natural man: strong drink, women, and foul language. But they also share much of the outlook of the average child: they enjoy singing, simple music, tall stories, finery, animals, and mascots. And Madame Brune's outrageous person had been adopted '*en mascotte*' by the veterans of the infantry of the Third Corps. But for that her carriage must long before have been abandoned to the snow, and the hardened mules which had drawn it so faithfully from the Vistula to Moscow would have ended their painful journey in the stomachs of starving men. At the very beginning of the retreat two attempts had been made to commandeer the mules and burn the carriage. But the old lady carried a box of pistols, and shot as straight and as unhesitatingly as she swore; traits which were also the principal

recommendation of her little Gascon driver — a silent man, with only three fingers on his left hand. After the two miniature skirmishes, in which three Italians, a Swiss, and a German, were shot down quickly and without fuss, the French soldiery took Madame Brune to their hearts, the more warmly, perhaps, because she was so lavish with the brandy she had with her; because many a poor devil, frost-bitten or wounded, was warmed and tended in her carriage; and because the old lady and Diane would tramp for miles in the ranks, giving up their places to men in agony who otherwise must have been left behind, to death in the snow or the doubtful mercies of the pursuit.

Diane, still numb from the shock of her husband's death, went through those ghastly days with the mechanical precision of an automaton, hardly caring whether she lived or died. She tended wounds, gossiped with Madame Brune, walked, rode, and even sang — when those pitiful songs rose uncertainly from the ragged despairing ranks — hardly conscious of scene and sequence. She lived entirely physically, from hour to hour, from day to day. Charles Auric was dead; Adam Konski hardly more substantial than a ghost. She never expected to see him again. But against that conviction, or even the suspicion of its thought, she shuttered her

mind most resolutely. Only her eyes strayed continually over her shoulder, to where through the chill mists the desultory shots of the rear-guard crackled; to where now and then she could glimpse haggard riders on stumbling horses feinting gallantly against the Cossack troops that hung upon the flank of the march.

Madame Brune, judging from past experiences of her own, thought no more than that the girl was in love, and proportionately miserable. She thereupon forebore to sympathize irritatingly and uselessly. She merely saw to it that Diane kept warm; that she fed and slept. Herself, being for once unhampered by the demands of love, she found an outlet for her persistent vitality in mothering the soldiers who had formed themselves into her unofficial escort. Swathed round in a huge sheepskin over breeches and high boots, she cut a more astonishing figure than ever. But men who stared and halted to laugh, remained to cheer. She cursed the weather and the Russians; she told vastly improper stories; she sang bawdy songs in her deep grenadier's voice. She was never at a loss for a word of encouragement, a memory of France, an oath, even a jeer or a blow, to hoist men out of the snow in which they had collapsed to wait for death, to start them on the march again, and keep them marching. . . .

Only at night, when she crept to Diane's side in the carriage, huddling close under the big fur rug, would she yield to the weakness of the flesh. Then, her face drawn and grey under its paint, she would pour dram after dram of brandy between her rouged lips and fade at last into a dreamless sleep: drunken, degraded, magnificent.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE

THE retreat went on. Now it had passed Smolensk, and once more the weather had changed to a treacherous, tantalizing thaw, hung about with damp mists. Adam Konski, after thirty-six continuous hours of duty on a foraging expedition with his dwindling troop of mounted men, had been lucky enough to find a ruined barn, and plenty of straw into the bargain, where Nimrod and he himself had slept soundly, in spite of the extremes of hunger and fatigue. He was rubbing his eyes dismally in the grey half-light of morning, when Jerzmanowski suddenly appeared, looming gigantic out of the mist. Usually the squadron leader was gay and care-free. During the horrors of the retreat, his persistence in an attitude of successful gallantry had come to seem positively theatrical. But this morning his face was grave, and there was no jauntiness nor spring in his walk. Even the fierce black moustache points, of which he was so proud, had lost their martial stiffness and dropped damply from his long upper lip.

Seeing Adam, he stopped and shook his head. 'It's all over for us,' he said. 'We've lost touch with

the main army. A patrol reports the Russians ahead of us. You'd better saddle up and be ready to move off. But it's useless. I must find the Marshal at once!' And he vanished again into the mist — a spectral figure, prophesying doom.

Adam turned back to the barn, and proceeded mechanically to the buckling of his sword-belt and the tightening of Nimrod's girths. During the recent days of the retreat his vitality had been so lowered by the intense cold, an insufficient diet of horse-flesh and dry biscuit, and lack of sleep, that his mind was incapable of grasping the implication of his squadron-commander's news. That the anticipated climax of his fears had arrived — that at last he was utterly separated from Diane, and facing imminent death into the bargain — hardly quickened pulses weakened and sluggish from weariness and hunger. Physical exhaustion brings the consolation of its own philosophy of necessary acquiescence with things as they are. It remained for Adam, as far as he could see, to collect his handful of men and follow Jerzmanowski in his search for Marshal Ney.

Until the last few days the commander of the rear-guard of the Grand Army had been for Adam little more than a name of lustre, and an influence — an influence that was perhaps the stronger for being impersonal: the pivot which upheld every man of

the snow-scourged, staggering infantry who marched and fired, and died, to hold off the pursuit. But now, with his mounted men reduced to a score of troopers and Adam Konski, Jerzmanowski could no longer furnish flanking and scouting patrols; and his handful of lancers served the Marshal for no more than a bodyguard, and a rallying point. Ney was to Adam no longer a name. He had become a man; almost *the man*. The broad-shouldered square figure; the red hair and whiskers topped by a battered and plumed blue hat always jauntily cocked; the bulldog jaw; the private's musket slung over the marshal's coat with its tarnished golden oak-leaves — this almost grotesque combination had sprung tremendous into the foreground of the drama. In comparison, even the Emperor now seemed dwarfed, almost insignificant. But the Emperor no longer rode his white horse, in his cocked hat and grey overcoat, at the head of conquering armies. Far away in front he led the retreat on foot, in a great fur-lined cloak, wearing on his head a dark red velvet cap trimmed with fox-fur, and in his right hand a thick staff of birch wood. For Adam it was as if, with every league westward, Napoleon faded more and more into his legend; while simultaneously Ney's heroic pose and stature grew more and more assured.

While he got his poor remnant into marching

order, the morning mists were thinning away in long grey drifting veils, revealing the desolation of the landscape under the pale winter sun. And with the return of visibility came the instant appreciation of two things: a few hundred yards eastward the rally of the French rear-guard round Ney's bivouac fire; westward the main road following the little rise on which stood the village of Krasnoi. When Adam had camped the night before that insignificant slope had been white with snow. This morning the snow was patterned with solid black oblong masses: the Russian battalions and batteries which had pushed into the gap between the Grand Army and its rear-guard; not less than eighty thousand men. With Ney were perhaps three thousand — not all of them armed.

For some minutes Adam stared, quietly and without moving, at those dark implacable masses. This must be the end, he was thinking. Beyond that little rise with its village spire, beyond that martial barrier of all arms, Diane, the Grand Army, the Emperor, even Poland, faded like a desert mirage. He was face to face with utter and obvious extinction. He knew it. And so far he was not afraid; could not even muster up regret. He could only stare, and wish that his feet were not so damnably cold. . . .

While he stood by Nimrod, a mounted man shot

out of the Russian lines and galloped furiously down the slope: an officer in a white uniform with a black steel cuirass, on a black charger, carrying a white flag on a lance-point. He rode down to Adam, wrenched in his lathered horse, making it rear and plunge, and demanded, in execrable French, to be conducted to the Marshal. With a curt nod Adam climbed wearily into his saddle. His lancers closed round the Russian, who threw a contemptuously pitying glance at their jaded, starving mounts beside his own magnificent steed, twirled a ferocious black moustache, and squared his shoulders, which seemed about to split his tight tunic. He made a superb picture of the conquering soldier. And, for an instant, Adam felt almost ashamed that his own leader should receive such an envoy, standing in a mixed group of officers and grenadiers, gnawing at a lump of half-cooked horse-flesh, and stamping furiously in the embers of a burnt-out fire to get some warmth into his feet.

But that moment of disappointment and shameful comparisons was not to last. The Russian dismounted with an elaborate salute. Ney deliberately eyed him, while he finished a mouthful of his breakfast. At last he spoke.

'Do you bring me Monsieur Kutusoff's surrender?' he asked casually; and continued to eat.

There was an appreciative roar of laughter from the soldiers standing round. The Russian went crimson above his tight collar. 'I am ordered,' said he, 'to offer you terms, M. le Maréchal, to avoid useless bloodshed.'

Ney flung a second piece of meat, which he held in his left hand, angrily away from him. Two linesmen fell upon it, like starving dogs, and the Russian smiled. 'We are twenty to one, and more,' he added. 'Surely you have done enough for honour.'

Ney laughed in his turn. 'We fight for France — to the devil with honour! Does Monsieur Kutusoff take us for children or old ladies?' He swung round to his men, hoisting his battered hat upon the barrel of his musket. 'Vive l'Empereur!' he yelled.

And tattered frost-bitten veterans, boy-conscripts, dismounted cavalry, the sick, the wounded, the dying, even the women, bared their teeth, and shook their weapons, or their fists, and thundered that salute which had made Europe cower, till the echoes went ringing up the Krasnoi slope.

As if in savage answer to such pathetically stubborn defiance came the boom of cannon. A Russian battery had opened fire. At this apparent violation of the white flag, Ney's cheeks went purple, his veins swelled on his forehead like cords, his tremendous voice volleyed oaths. One huge fist smashed

the Russian envoy to earth. The other gripped his throat and shook him like a dog.

'Are these your terms?' he roared furiously, and shouted to Jerzmanowski to disarm and arrest him.

The white flag Ney ground into the snow with his heel. Then he turned to the Russian, who swayed uncertainly between two guards, one hand pressed against his bruised and bleeding cheek. 'You brought your general's terms to me!' said the Marshal savagely. 'You shall take mine back to him! Forward, march!' And the second division of the rear-guard, the treacherous envoy pricked in front of them by two bayonets, went forward up the slope towards Krasnoi, to certain destruction at the muzzles of the Russian guns.

All through that short winter day Adam stood behind Ney, watching the thin French columns climb the hill, like thin black snakes against the snow: saw the painful futile lurching attacks; heard the ragged pitiful songs; smelled the harsh reek of powder, drifting down wind from the stricken field on which France upheld the dying eagles of a cause foredoomed.

Those insanely gallant onslaughts — less attacks than mere mechanical stumblings forward by men too fatigued to charge, too cold to prime their muskets — gained nothing but time and imperishable

glory. To the men who fought that day victory was as distant, as unattainable, as France. They died in heaps upon the Krasnoi slope for nothing more concrete and definable than that honour of armies, which, having no equivalent in cash values, must seem to us nowadays fantastically old-fashioned. Yet those who survived reaped the reward of valour. For after the early dark had fallen, and while the Russians sat still, believing the French remnant to be safely in the trap, Ney led his men back upon their blood-stained tracks eastwards into the night.

As he jolted along at Jerzmanowski's elbow, Adam could hear his squadron leader muttering savagely to himself. 'Mad — madness — but, Mon Dieu! What a man!' While in front of them, the Marshal, who had refused a mount with an oath, and a demand to know if his Poles questioned the courage of his legs, stalked ahead; an indomitable, square-shouldered bulk in the gloom.

Suddenly he called a halt. They had come to a brook in a shallow ravine cutting across the track where the bridge had been broken behind them the night before in the retreat.

'Break the ice!' barked Ney over his shoulder.

Jerzmanowski, half-asleep — he had been riding all day with orders during the battle — was nodding stupidly in his saddle. Adam struggled to earth,

stumbled to the bank, knelt down, and thudded clumsily at the ice with his sabre-hilt.

'Which way does the water flow?' demanded the Marshal.

It was perhaps the bravest action of Adam's life, when he stripped off one of his gauntlets, and plunged his bare hand into that hideous invisible stream. It was so bitterly cold that it felt as if he had thrust his fingers against white-hot steel. Smothering a cry, he got to his feet.

'It flows to the left, sir,' he said through chattering teeth.

Ney nodded. 'We follow its course till we strike the Dnieper then,' he said, after a moment. 'We must cross the river.'

Adam started. Neither discipline nor his awe of Ney could prevent him blurting out that the Dnieper would not be frozen over after the thaw of two nights back.

'I know the North, sir,' he added defensively. 'The ice will be broken.'

Ney shrugged his shoulders. 'There will be ice,' he said simply. '*En avant!*' He shouldered his musket and marched ahead. And Adam climbed onto Nimrod's back, rather dizzily, and drove an ungentle elbow into Jerzmanowski's ribs.

They went on through the night, hour after hour,

those defeated, frozen, hungry men, till, towards midnight, they came to the steep bank of the Dnieper, and saw the river glinting faintly in the starlight. Ney was justified. There was ice. But it was broken ice, shifting and grinding in the flow of the stream. But that courage of despair which had driven the Marshal to his desperate course was also justified. For he had — by the mercy of God or the inscrutable design of Fate — struck the river where there was a sharp turn in its course. The bend had jammed the drifting ice into a pack that formed a grotesque and shifting bridge.

Across that treacherous bridge, which crackled and swayed and ground underfoot, the rear-guard made its way, Ney leading to test its safety. And for three hours he and his bodyguard watched his men struggle to the bank: all who could still go afoot, with their arms and such food as they could carry. Their remaining six guns, their carts, and their wounded had to be left behind. And in the grey dawn perhaps a thousand men plodded westward again along the northern bank of the river to find and rejoin their comrades of the main army.

The third day after the crossing of the ice, Adam Konski, more slouched than ever in his saddle, rode Nimrod in a ghastly parody of a canter across the bridge at Orcha to report to the Emperor that his

Marshal and the Third Corps were marching in — still marching to the beat of their half-dozen remaining drums; not quite nine hundred men in all. And the Third Corps had marched into Russia forty thousand strong.

CHAPTER XX

THE FIRES OF THE BERESINA

THE river Beresina has passed into history. But to Adam Konski it was not the scene of a magnificent feat of arms; not the place where the Grand Army finally baffled the Russian pursuit; not a scene of glorious tragedy. To him it was only the place where he found Diane again.

That morning — while Oudinot battled among the hordes of Borissow; while the four hundred French sappers stood up to their waists in the icy water of the Studianka ford to build the trestled bridges for the retreat; while the Emperor stood on the bank handing wine to the toiling, straining men, whose drenched clothes froze upon them as they worked — Adam Konski, leading Nimrod by the bridle in a desperate search for forage, came upon the yellow carriage. Its wheels had turned for the last time. Not even devotion to Madame Brune had availed to keep its 'escort' from crowding to join the heaving, struggling mass at the heads of the half-built bridges. And a half-demented gunner-officer had commandeered the two staunch mules for his battery, which, like all the others, had lost three-

quarters of its draught-horses. The carriage stood, aloof, picturesque, quite astonishingly out of place, where it had been dragged to the side of the road.

Adam approached it without quickening his pace. The empty shafts to him automatically implied the worst. And with the rear-guard he had seen and suffered such degrees of agony and death that his mind could grasp no more. That Diane was dead he had believed now for days. To find this belated confirmation produced no effect upon a system mentally and physically numbed, overdriven by misery and hardship.

Indeed it was only in the vague instinctive hope of perhaps finding some form of food for himself or for his horse, that he dragged open the door.

'I thought you were happily dead!' croaked out a thin rasping voice from the shelter of a fur rug. And next instant Diane, in her turn, was muttering Adam's name, and laughing weakly; laughing and laughing in a toneless titter that jarred Adam's nerves horribly.

He dragged her into his arms, and peered desperately into her face. There were purple hollows under her eyes, which glittered feverishly. Her gloved hands fumbled pathetically over his face and chest, as she tried to compel belief in the actuality of his physical presence. Adam could not speak. He

wanted to cry shamelessly. He could not. He could only caress Diane clumsily, conscious of an ineffable happiness which yet had no power to make him forget the eternal cravings of his stomach.

'You look hungry!' said Madame Brune, at last. 'Here, get in! I don't want to freeze yet, and there is still one bottle of brandy left.'

Adam clambered into the carriage beside Diane. Madame Brune was fumbling under the seat, and Adam looked at her with a certain horror. Her hands were wrinkled yellow talons, continually trembling. Her lips were grey. Her eyes were no more than slits under dark lids, appallingly swollen. Above her forehead, which was now like creased parchment, a few red curls from her wig, straggling from the corner of her fur cap, appeared, horrible as paint upon a dead face. Adam turned away his head and mechanically took off his own cap. And then he laughed, for in a little mirror set in the back of the box of the carriage, he saw his own face. It was a caricature in skin and bone; and his hair was white, like an old man's. Squeamishness at another's appearance was distinctly out of place . . . But so was laughter, and seemingly neither he nor Diane could stop laughing . . .

Suddenly he found a cup half-filled with brandy thrust into his hand by Madame Brune. The old

lady was sitting almost erect again, with a hectic flush on her cheeks and a ghastly smile twisting her mouth. Adam drank down the brandy and forced himself to swallow a little food. Then he induced Diane to follow his example, though she protested that even to swallow nauseated her. Finally Madame Brune tilted the bottle between her shaking hands, poured its dregs down her own throat, and let it fall empty on her knees.

'It is the last,' she said. 'Young man, you have come just in time to take up your duties again. By to-night I shall be dead.' Her voice was thin as a ghost's, but perfectly steady, entirely matter-of-fact. Adam tried to deny her, but the words stuck in his throat, for he saw tears welling up in Madame Brune's eyes and trickling down her cheeks.

'I am too old,' she went on. 'I knew I should never see Paris again, when I could no longer march with the men — that day when Jules died in the carriage from his shattered knee, and they forced me to take his place because I was too slow — I knew then.' Diane put out a hand and the old lady grasped it hard. 'I was angry, you see. I was afraid for this little one if she was left all alone — she is too young, too pretty for this frozen hell! Now you can take care of her — I do not matter any longer, thank God!'

'Nonsense!' said Adam gruffly; and muttered half to himself, 'The regiment!'

Madame Brune clung to his sleeve. 'Your duty is to the girl!' she insisted. 'She went as a man before! She took me in, the baggage — even me for an instant! She can do it again! But go with you she must! What is this talk of regiments?' She pointed through the windows of the carriage. 'I never imagined that would be a sight for my dying eyes!' she whispered bitterly, sinking back in her corner.

Adam looked in the direction of her pointing finger. A great fire had been kindled in the snow, of wood obtained by smashing two or three wooden huts to pieces with the axes of the engineers. A thick column of smoke rose against the desolate empty sky. About it stood a group of officers and sergeants in attitudes of dejection and despair. A report had just reached them that the Russian advance was bound to develop before the bridges could be completed. So these men, who had made up the Sacred Squadron for the defence of the Emperor's person in the retreat, and had carried for so many dreadful leagues the eagles of their various regiments, were now to cast the precious symbols of their former glory into the flames to save them from capture. One or two of the band swore, wept, or gesticulated wildly. Among them Adam thought he could recognize his

uncle Ignatius; how well he could imagine the veteran's expression of hopeless fury, his torrential oaths. But for the most part the eagles were consumed under eyes dazed with sheer misery, and utter incapacity to realize the significance of the holocaust. Those men could as easily have experienced the sensation of burning their own hearts. It was the end of their world, the last gathering of the eagles of the Grand Army: their wings, so often plumed with victories, broken at last and cast into the fire.

'It is the end,' whispered Madame Brune. 'I die with the death of the Empire.' Spent and breathless she closed her eyes. Diane bent over her.

Suddenly, high above the crackle of distant musketry, a cavalry trumpet rang out, fiercely compelling. Outside the carriage door Nimrod pricked his ears, and jerked up his head. For a second Adam hesitated. Again the trumpet sounded, and Adam made his decision. 'At all costs get her out — make your way as close to the bridge-head as you can!' he said urgently to Diane. 'I will rejoin you there!' And hurriedly turning his head away to avoid seeing the despair in her face, Adam wrenched open the door, swung himself clumsily onto Nimrod's back, and urged the gallant beast into a stumbling trot towards the river. He did not dare to look back. For the moment discipline had vanquished emotional-

ism; the sound of the trumpet had spoken louder than Diane's voice. But the devil of temptation to the easier way rode behind Adam on his saddle, and whispered all manner of damnable seduction into his ear.

So he stared fiercely before him, till the sights which met his gaze drove even the abandoned yellow carriage temporarily from his thoughts. The river-bank was a shambles of the living. Here a few grenadiers crouched sullenly about a miserable fire, waiting for orders. There an officer of sappers stood, wearing full uniform, waving a sword, laughing, and quite mad. French and Italians, Croats and Germans, Poles, Spaniards, and Portuguese, swayed and lurched to and fro; some crying, some shouting, a few silent and ranked. Close to the bridge a cluster of canteen men and sutlers, women and children, were clinging together in half a dozen overturned carts, sobbing helplessly, quite unnerved. Beyond them in the snow a girl of fourteen, an astrakhan cap on her head, her hair falling over her shoulders, and tears frozen on her face, was sitting quietly beside the body of her mother. Her bare hands were clasped together in her lap. Adam called out to her. She did not move; would not even glance up from her dead. While next to her, an old soldier, with the two chevrons that meant fifteen

years' service, deliberately lay down, wrapping his head in an old and filthy sheepskin, to await his end.

By the bridge-head itself stood Marshal Lefebvre, a pistol in each hand, his voice hoarse as a crow's, shouting futile orders, engaged in a magnificently futile effort to stem the approach of the mob, which threatened to swamp the bridge. Under Adam's eyes he was swept onto the bridge, and compelled to cross to escape being suffocated or crushed. A third time the trumpet called, shrill and imperious. It came from beyond the river. And Adam plunged desperately into the swirling seething mass, and found himself carried against a man with a thin foxy face in a general's blue tunic.

Forgetful of discipline or rank, Adam caught him by the sleeve. 'Where are the Polish Light Horse?' he demanded.

The other glared furiously out of unpleasantly pale eyes. 'Are you mad?' he snapped. 'Who knows or cares? To the devil with you and your damned Poles! Poles, you say! May God damn Poland! But for the accursed country we should never be in this hell! Poland!' And he spat in the snow at Adam's feet.

Adam's hand was on his sabre-hilt. But so great was the press that he could not draw his weapon. And in an instant he had been forced away from the

general by the main body of the rush for the bridge. He was flung aside, tossed to and fro helplessly like a leaf in a gale; and at last found himself, still shaking all over with fury, on the outskirts of the fugitive throng. He had no eyes now for the horrors of the river-bank; no ears for the battle raging both behind and across the river — not even for the clarion voice of the trumpet of his regiment. Was it for a nation of such foxy cravens as that pale-eyed general that Poles had poured out their blood from Wilno to Moscow, from Moscow to the Beresina? Was it for France, which now abandoned Poland to the pursuing Muscovites, that he, Adam Konski, must leave Diane to the Russians and the cold? To the devil with France, and the French service!

And, clutching at Nimrod's bridle, he turned back towards the carriage, and saw the figures of its two occupants standing beside it in the snow. When he reached them the old woman was bent almost double, supported only by Diane's firm arms, coughing painfully, and yet looking up with a smile which was not all travesty and simulation; and the fury died out of Adam's heart as swiftly as it had been born.

Only one thing could be done. With infinite labour he and Diane hoisted Madame Brune, in spite of her muttered protests and even oaths, onto

Nimrod's back. Then, one on each side of the horse, they moved slowly towards the bridge. With one hand Adam and Diane held the old lady in the saddle. With the other Adam swung his sabre, Diane a heavy crop. And neither was sparing in their use. It was every man for himself — the survival of the strongest. And in that half hour of ultimate horror, Adam, Diane, and Nimrod proved themselves strong and pitiless realists; and so survived the crossing.

Nimrod struggled gallantly with his limp burden through the loathsome marsh on the farther bank, which was the culminating horror of the bridge. But there Madame Brune collapsed. Diane's exhausted body could no longer sustain her, and she rolled to the ground like a sack, inert and helpless. But for her eyes, still indomitably alive, she might have been already a corpse. Adam and Diane, bending over her, looked helplessly at each other.

'Go on! Leave me!' came the ghost of a whisper through Madame Brune's blue lips.

'Never!' flared the girl.

Adam nodded, blinking his eyelids furiously to check tears.

'Blessed — damned — young fools!' whispered the old lady. 'Go! Be happy ——'

Adam gazed wildly round. Past them streamed

the wreckage of the army. Beyond the deadly stream the Russian cannon boomed louder, nearer, more insistent and menacing. And great tongues of fire shot skywards from the abandoned carts and caissons at the bridgehead. To go on was impossible. To stay was madness. But beside the road stood a small wooden hut, its door swinging crazily open; and into this shelter with Diane's help he dragged Madame Brune. The place must have been used as a storehouse for flour, for it was full of empty sacks. Of these they made a rough couch, and there laid her, covering her with their cloaks for warmth, and sitting close beside her, almost forgetful of their own disastrous plight.

There they sat in a sort of apathetic watchfulness through that day of panic and horror, of fire, and flight, and battle. Outside the snow drifted down, the wind howled, the cannon roared, and muskets spat death and wounds. Inside the hut were silence, despair, cold, and the imminence of death. Towards evening, when in the early dusk the light was already fading off the snow, Madame Brune at last opened her eyes.

'Poor children!' she murmured.

There was a silence. Diane pulled one of the cloaks higher towards the old lady's chin.

Madame Brune spoke again. This time her voice

rasped out quite strongly: 'Brandy, Lucien! Quickly! Brandy, damn you! Brandy for my soldiers!' Her firm jaw dropped. And so she died.

Adam and Diane kneeled down stiffly on either side of her body and crossed themselves.

That night, when the army bivouacked, a small squad of Grenadiers of the Guard went the round of the little struggling fires, asking for wood that the Emperor might warm himself. Everywhere the answer was returned, 'Take what you will for the Emperor!'—even from the dying and the wounded; even after the crossing of the Beresina.

CHAPTER XXI
DREADFUL NIGHT

TWENTY–FOUR hours later found Adam and Diane still together, and again in the shelter of a peasant's cottage. And now their plight was desperate indeed. The previous night Adam had crouched on watch between the living and the dead: between Diane helpless in a stupor of reaction and fatigue, and what had once been Madame Brune. And through the dreadful hours of darkness he envied the old woman her peace and rest. For her neither cold nor hunger, fear of the Russians, nor human affection, had any more significance. She had escaped. And, looking at Diane's wasted features and crumpled body, Adam cursed the youth and strength which still bound her and himself to the wheel of tortured life. Absorbed in such bitter musings, and in ironical considerations of the outcome of his would-be romantic adventurings, he paid no heed to the sudden revival of firing, the mingled cries, tumult, and movement, which should have warned him that under cover of night the Grand Army was once more upon the march, driven by the growing fear of a pursuit that continued so unaccountably, so unreasonably lax. But there was no longer with the

Russian headquarters one in whose veins flowed the fiery blood of Jenghiz Khan . . .

So that the new day broke to reveal a plain empty save for dying and dead. At last Adam and Diane were among the final jetsam of the retreat — the stragglers abandoned even by Ney's rear-guard. Hardly could Adam persuade the girl to leave the body of her friend.

'We must die,' she said quietly. 'Let us stay here — with her.'

'She died, I think, partly of her own will,' said Adam, 'to give us the opportunity to go on, unburdened by her.'

Diane laughed hysterically. 'Go on!' she repeated.

Her mirthless laughter died suddenly, and they both fell silent. Their last food had been eaten. The last bottle of brandy had been drunk in the carriage. There was nothing even for Nimrod. On one side lay the river, and on the other the limitless expanse of frozen plains; all white save for the wavering track where the army had lurched on its way, bordered by small black dots, singly or in groups, lying ominously still. There was not even a sign of Cossack patrols to break that monotony; the apparent deadness of a frozen world.

'We must go on, or go mad!' said Adam at last.

He took Diane's arm and led her out to where

Nimrod stood patiently in the snow. When she was mounted, he turned back to the hut, and, standing in the doorway, straightened himself painfully, and saluted.

All that day they plodded on westwards, and saw no living thing. But when towards evening they came upon another empty hut, even Adam's despairing courage had to face the inexorable fact that they had reached the end of their tether. Nimrod's gait had become so staggering that Diane had refused firmly to ride any longer; and both she and Adam himself were reeling along blindly like drunkards, while hunger racked and tore their vitals. But for a little straw the hut was bare as the palm of a hand. It was also verminous, for other stragglers had passed that way. But Adam and Diane were in no condition to notice such a detail. At least it gave shelter from the cruelty of the wind, and there lurked within a little warmer air, though of means or material to make a fire there was nothing. Squatting on the floor of stamped earth they stared dully into each other's grey faces. They had hardly strength left to speak. Indeed, what remained to be said?

For a long time they sat thus silently, till at last Diane uttered a little moan, and slipped over sideways, her hands pressed to the pit of her stomach.

'For God's sake give me your pistol, Adam!' she gasped out, twisting her head sideways. 'I could stand the cold — I could face danger — I could face danger ——' her voice broke. 'I'm so hungry,' she added simply, and held out her hand.

Adam shrank away. He could not trust himself to speak. And now he would not dare to sleep; and he had not closed his eyes for forty-eight hours. His head felt light and empty. His throat was burning. He shook all over as though stricken with an ague. . . .

Very slowly he crawled to the door, and dragged himself to his feet with the support of the doorpost. Diane had turned her face to the wall, and lay twitching, like a shot rabbit. He choked down a dry sob, stooped down, and groped for his belt and holsters. Then, carrying his sabre unsheathed and a loaded pistol, he went out into the night. Nimrod was standing where he had stopped in his tracks, head and tail drooping. He pricked his ears and whinnied feebly as his master appeared through the darkness. . . .

Inside the hut Diane cried out, and sat up wide-eyed. From the surrounding dark had echoed the crash of a pistol-shot, fired at close quarters. A whiff of acrid smoke drifted to her nostrils through the open door. And she was alone.

'Adam!' she cried out; and her voice was harsh with panic. 'Adam! Adam!' The last word was a toneless scream as she scrambled madly to her feet.

She made blindly for the dim-lit oblong of the doorway; then recoiled. Adam stood there framed against the snow, his face glimmering white. In one hand was his sabre. From both dripped blood.

'We must not be fanciful,' he croaked out. 'We are starving. We must eat raw meat. We can roll it in snow.' And he giggled helplessly.

'Where? How? You fired!' said the girl.

'Don't talk! Eat!' he snarled.

She backed away from him, and suddenly threw up her hands as though struck. 'Nimrod!' she said. 'Adam! You should have killed me first!'

Adam's sabre clattered to the ground. 'I loved him,' he said.

'Then why — why?'

He turned, fumblingly closed the door, so that she could no longer see his face, and leaned his back against it. He needed a barrier, however futile and flimsy, between himself and the scene of what, most unwillingly, he had done.

'Nothing can matter now.' His voice came slow and measured through the darkness. 'I can tell you. I love you also. I have loved you since first I saw you in that Wilno room; that evening when you

threw back your dolman sitting in the window, and I saw the swell of your left breast under the braid on your tunic, and knew you for a girl; the evening when Philippe Lauzun warned me that you belonged to Charles. Philippe was no fool. He could see things as they were, as they would turn out. He is dead, and Charles is dead — but you and I live on in this hell, only to die to-morrow or next day. And I love you, Diane.'

'You killed your horse — for me?'

'You were hungry,' said Adam.

The girl sobbed once uncontrollably.

'What else?' he went on. 'I would have cut out my heart or cut off my head for you — gladly. It would not have fed you.'

'You should have killed me!' she flashed.

'Perhaps. But I could not. I love you.'

In the darkness he suddenly felt her dry lips press against his cheek. 'And I love you,' she said. And her arms went round his neck. They stood so, locked together, body to body, for a long space, while time seemed to pause, and circumstances to fade into the unreal and the insignificant . . .

The girl was the first to return to an appreciation of realities.

'We must eat,' she said, unclasping her arms. And when Adam shuddered, she added swiftly: 'Or

was this deed of yours just a romantic gesture? Was the bullet aimed at my heart?'

'I'm a fool!' said Adam abruptly.

They managed to choke down some morsels of the raw horse-flesh, first powdering it thickly with snow. And horrible though it may sound, they felt the better for it. The blood began to course through their veins, and a little colour crept back into their faces.

'God! How it makes one despise oneself!' muttered Adam, when the meal was over. 'A few ounces of flesh in our stomachs, and we become like gods! Without them we are lower than the beasts! It is intolerable!'

'To our vanity, yes,' said Diane. 'I don't think I have any left. Once I believed myself beautiful. But I left my beauty at the Beresina, and my vanity died with it. We must depend on something or some one, all of us. I am warm again now — but I long for the sunshine of the south even more than I longed for food.'

Though Diane could not see them, Adam's lips twisted in a wry smile.

'I cannot bring you the sun,' he said, and felt absurdly bitter as he spoke.

'I did not mean that, my dear. Do you know the South?'

'I have never been west of the Vistula,' said Adam.

He felt Diane's hands moving along his sleeve, as she crept up against him in the dark. 'We will go together,' she went on. 'Think of a dark blue sea meeting a dark blue sky, cloudless in the sunlight; of great patches in that sea of liquid green and purple. Landwards the mountains rise from the coast, and grey-green olive groves shimmer under a faint breeze along their lower slopes. Everywhere is warmth, and colour, and quiet. For the people in their pink or white houses, green-shuttered against the noonday glare, are lazy, and kind. Here, in these cold savage spaces of the North, that coast is inconceivable. I remember it as though it had been the drop-scene in a theatre — the setting of a play I enjoyed long ago: painted canvas. I even remember my father as an actor against a background unbelievably unreal.'

'Go on talking,' said Adam. Soothed by the girl's voice he had travelled in spirit far from the campaign of Russia. To return to it was agony.

'Monsieur le Marquis de Frontenac!' whispered Diane. 'How he loves his name — that old man! What a darling! I long to see him again one day. I wonder where he is to-night.'

'And what he is doing?'

'Oh, of that I am quite certain,' said Diane, laugh-

ing. She patted Adam's stubbled cheek, and silence fell between them.

That little spurt of gay laughter was like the expiring flicker of a candle-flame in a darkening room. The next thing that Adam realized was that the girl was shivering violently in his arms.

'What is it?' he asked anxiously.

'I'm so cold,' she answered; and her teeth chattered. 'Adam — I think I am going to die. My limbs are like ice.'

Adam groaned; but she laid a cold hand across his mouth.

'I'm not afraid,' she said.

'No,' said Adam hoarsely, 'but I am!' He began to rub her arms and legs feverishly, kneading them roughly with his knuckles.

'Must we die now?' said Diane. 'Just when we have really found each other — like any cheap tragedy? When it's too cold for us to think of appropriately fine phrases to ring down the curtain?' She laughed — but now light-headedly.

Kneeling down beside her, Adam caught the girl to him, and held her fiercely against his chest. Their mutual refusal to admit their love had wasted the dreary, deadly days of the retreat, until now their time was come to die. But this one night remained to them. Left alone Diane must die of cold

before morning. She must share Adam's body's warmth or perish. It was the last chance — not only for their love, but for her life. For once Romance, Desire, and Naked Need marched abreast, equally compelling to a single end . . .

Curiously cool-headed and deliberate now, Adam unbuttoned Diane's tunic, and slid it from her shoulders. She uttered a little sigh, put up her lips to his, and lay, limp, unresisting, and happy in his arms.

CHAPTER XXII

ADAM TELLS A TALE

It is something of an anti-climax to have to record that, four days from the night when they had slept in each other's arms, Adam Konski and Diane rode into Wilno safe and sound. It had happened that a squadron of lancers belonging to General Dombrowski's Polish division, which had reënforced the Grand Army from Lithuania just before the Beresina, comparatively fresh and well mounted, had been detailed to fall back, cover the heroic rear-guard and succour stragglers. They fell in with Adam and Diane, and the former's Polish nationality saved both their lives.

For the time being their troubles were over, though Wilno could be but a temporary stopping-place in the retreat, which now obviously would hardly stop at the Elbe or even at the Rhine. For the army was melting like snow in a spring thaw, and order and discipline were beyond vanishing-point: the more so since the Emperor, now that his soldiers had escaped the Beresina trap, had been driven to leave for Paris by the news of Malet's conspiracy.

For the moment, however, the pursuit had been

distanced, and it was reasonable to hope to be able to remain in the town for at least three days. Adam accordingly established Diane in the old quarters of 'The Sacred Flies,' where he had first seen her with Charles and with Lauzun. The house was secluded. Its doors were solid, with stout bolts and bars. So Adam could leave the girl there confidently, while he went out into the narrow roaring streets to collect food and drink.

Wilno was chaos. At least ten thousand men, of every regiment and nationality, the majority either drunk or half-mad from the horrors they had endured, were roaming the streets, searching madly for brandy, food, and shelter. For the most part in rags and tattered furs, with ice on their hair and their beards, terribly frost-bitten, their appearance was as ghastly as their condition. Save in rare cases it was impossible to distinguish the private from his general, the camp-follower from the grenadier of the Imperial Guard. Food was unprocurable — for the depots of the commissariat had been stormed at once, and the inhabitants barred their doors and windows — and news was confined to the circulation of the wildest rumours: that the Emperor was dead; that Russia had made peace; that Alexander had sworn to lay Paris in ashes in revenge for burned Moscow. Among such wild tales flying from

lip to lip in that seething mob of soldiery, Adam Konski was carried by the throng rather than of his own will to the gates of the palace, where with Charles and Diane he had halted to watch the lights and hear the dance music the night they had ridden into Russia. He saw it now for what it was: a mean pretentious barn of a building, flaunting a sham splendour; where formerly, in the glamour of the beginning of the great adventure, it had appeared a palace worthy of the master of the Tuileries. That searing example of truth stripped of romantic trappings brought home to Adam, as few things had yet done, the complete ruin of his dream: of Poland reconstituted as a Kingdom by Napoleon. He turned away sick at heart, and found himself facing Charles Auric at a distance of perhaps two feet: Charles Auric indubitably alive, obviously healthy, fantastically smiling.

This was a very different Charles Auric from the bemused Charles of the room in the Moscow palace; from the white-faced, shrinking Charles whom Adam had last seen riding at Anna Ivanovna's elbow. This was the Charles of the early days of the adventure, his eyes shining, his body poised and eager, looking the more superb for the rabble that pressed all about him. He wore no uniform. But there was nothing in his look or bearing to imply that he had

forfeited the right ever to wear a French uniform again. He grasped Adam's hand and wrung it warmly.

'But I'm glad to see you alive!' he exclaimed. And Adam could have sworn by the sincerity of his clasp, and his voice. 'I never hoped to see you again,' Charles went on. 'And Diane? Frontenac — you know! My wife?'

Again Adam could have sworn by the reality of his expression of fear and his anxiety. 'She is safe,' he stammered.

'Thank God!' said Charles. 'Where?'

That sudden monosyllable, fierce, possessive, single-hearted, struck Adam physically like a blow over his heart. 'Come somewhere out of this ghastly crowd,' he said hoarsely. 'We must talk a little.'

Charles glared. 'Talk be damned!' he snapped. 'I must find my wife! Where is she?'

Adam did not budge, nor bat an eyelid. His hand caught Charles's wrist. 'You'll listen to me!' he said, and drew Charles to where some stone steps led up to a church and a churchyard standing back from the street.

Among untended graves Adam and Charles Auric faced each other. 'You're become very definite, young man,' sneered the Frenchman, as he wrenched his arm free and stood back, panting a little.

'Do I look a young man?' parried Adam, and whipped off his fur cap. Charles recoiled, and his gaze wavered away. 'As you see, I have changed. Do you pretend you are the same? Have you forgotten Moscow? "The Spider"? Mon Dieu, Captain Auric, but your memory must be a good and faithful servant!'

Charles's blue eyes narrowed, but he stood firm. His set mouth tightened a little. He had decided upon his course during the weary days which had followed the death of Anna Ivanovna. Free of his French uniform, well-provided with money, he had been in no danger. For nights he had considered his personal problem, lying sleepless on hard peasant beds, staring at filthy smoke-grimed rafters. His treachery had failed to pay with the death of his patroness. In other Russian eyes he would have no value. His brain, freed from 'The Spider's' unholy influence, worked swiftly, logically, cold-bloodedly again. He must return to the French service. After all there was no witness against him but Adam Konski, whom he despised both as a Pole and as a callow boy. He could bamboozle Adam — and Diane loved him. Given self-assurance, which was his in plenty, his bluff was sure of success. . . .

'You deal in hints and insinuations,' he said coldly. 'Do I understand that you bring an accusation against me, your superior officer?'

Adam lost his temper. 'Coward! Traitor! Renegade!' he flung the words like missiles in the other's face.

Charles only smiled. 'So my little play-acting deceived you too?' he said pleasantly. 'I won that woman's confidence. I tricked her at every turn, for all that I was wounded and helpless. I was accepted by Russia as a secret agent, and I have returned to the Grand Army. Can you pick a hole in my record?'

Adam's clenched fists dropped limply to his side.

'I have come back to my wife and my countrymen,' Charles went on. 'Do you need more proof of my honesty? I should have challenged you for your insults — but I am sorry for you — your youth, and the hardships you have endured ——'

'Stop!' cried Adam.

The smooth flow of Charles's sentences nauseated him. He knew him for a double traitor, a liar, a black villain. He felt polluted in breathing the same air. Yet this villainy was incapable of proof. And Charles had come back to Diane. And Diane loved him. . . .

Adam moistened very dry lips. 'Listen,' he said. 'I know you for what you are, and that I cannot prove what I know. You have won. But there is another thing — you have come back to your wife.

You shall never see her, unless you promise me one thing.'

'And what' asked Charles dangerously, 'has my wife to do with you?'

'A great deal,' said Adam simply. 'In the retreat we have been together. We saved each other's lives. We rode, and fed, and slept, side by side. I love her, and she thinks she loves me.'

'You cur!'

'If you kill me you will never find her,' Adam continued calmly. 'She thought you dead. I gave her your message — you remember — in Moscow? She came to me in our necessity for warmth and protection. But I am not quite a fool, Captain Auric. I know whom she loves, if we stand alive together in front of her.'

'Well?'

'Swear to me she shall know nothing of your life with "The Spider"; that you will never admit it was you who sent that message of your death; that you will love her, honour her, and serve her — and I give her back to you!'

'And if I refuse?' Charles muttered between his teeth.

Adam's right hand slid into a pocket of his coat. 'I shall shoot you like the dog you are!' he answered. 'As I should, if I did not know that Diane loves you

with all her body and soul — would still love you after the fashion of women, though you were Judas Iscariot!'

'If I accept?'

'I will see her once more — alone. And then I will send you to her.'

'Why should I trust you?' burst out Charles, after a pause. 'This is madness!'

'Trust — or die! Choose, Captain Auric!'

Charles shrugged his shoulders. 'I have not survived a campaign, and ridden here from Moscow, to be shot by a lunatic!' he said. ' I accept.'

'You swear it?'

'Yes, I swear it.'

Adam nodded abruptly. His last hope was gone. Charles Auric had run perfectly true to form to the end. He snatched his hand from his pocket as though the pistol-butt scorched his hand. The temptation to press that trigger had so nearly mastered him. Then he plunged down the steps again into the roaring street. Charles Auric followed at his heels, a little bewildered, but with lips curling, and eyes superbly contemptuous of such sentimentality, such grotesque lack of sense of proportion and reality.

Just inside the doorway of the old quarters Auric halted, looking about him uneasily. Perhaps even

his cold heart beat the faster at this rounding of the circle. That dark hall must have been full of memories — of his comradeship with dead Lauzun, of thwarted ambitions, of dreams of victory and glory now turned to nightmares of defeat.

'You will wait here,' said Adam, at the foot of the short flight of steps. 'But, in case you may be tempted to break your oath, I shall lock the door.' And, turning his back deliberately upon Charles, he went up the steps, and into the room at their head.

Diane was sitting in the window, her chin on her hand. For a little space Adam stood still and watched her, drinking in his last sight of her beauty. She was beautiful no longer. She was stamped with the cruel seals of the retreat. But Adam saw her as he had seen her for the first time — young, strong, lovely, graceful — and unattainable. His heart thudded. His eyes blurred. He was conscious of a desire, almost overmastering in its pitiful intensity, to kneel at her feet, lay his head on her knees, tell her the whole truth, and compel her to choose between love and pity, between Charles's treason and his own loyalty. He knew Diane now. As things were the issue would be plain. She would sacrifice herself to loyalty, rejecting love. She would leave Charles for him — and she would be unhappy.

Adam could not forget the look on her face in the Moscow street when he had given her the news of Charles's death. It was as if a lamp had gone out behind her eyes. Adam gritted his teeth. That lamp must be relighted. For he loved her. The argument was indisputable.

He turned blindly, and locked the door with fumbling uncertain fingers.

At the sound Diane looked up, sprang up, crossed the room, held out her arms. Adam bent his head, and looked at the floor. Her hands touched his shoulders.

'No,' he said. His voice sounded unreal and far-away.

Diane laughed. Adam jerked up his chin. 'You mustn't touch me,' he said. 'I have no right.'

'No right?'

'None. I gambled, but I have lost. Charles is in Wilno.'

The girl put out a shaking hand. Her face was white as paper. 'Charles is dead!' she cried. 'Adam! Are you mad?'

'Charles is here,' Adam insisted. 'I lied to you. He was wounded and captured. I prayed he might die. I loved you. And so I lied to gain what otherwise I knew I could never have.'

Diane seized his hands. 'I don't believe you!' she cried. 'What does it all mean?'

'It's true — I swear it. I only tell you because Charles is coming here.'

'Here?' Fear — or was it unwilling, unbidden joy? — leaped into her eyes. 'Charles is coming, and I — you ——' She reeled back and stared at Adam, as though he bore with him the head of Medusa. But once more she was to prove her courage. 'What do you suggest we do?' she said at last.

Adam shrugged his shoulders.

'Are you coward as well as liar?' flared Diane.

Realities seemed to be crumbling all about her, and she clutched at anger as a last support. Could this sulky craven be the same gallant boy who had guarded and tended and loved her during the last weeks? Could nothing stir him to normality?

'I suppose you will ask me next to guard our guilty secret from my husband?' she sneered; and the tawdry *cliché* cut like a whip.

Adam played his final card. 'I do ask that,' he said.

'For my sake of course?' cried Diane sarcastically. 'Adam, for God's sake, pull yourself together! I've done nothing of which I am ashamed! I don't believe you lied to me about Charles — it must have been some mistake! He'll understand!'

Adam strode towards her and threw out his hands.

'He won't! I did lie — you mustn't tell him! He'll kill me!' he stammered. His face was damp. His fingers twitched.

Diane drew away from him, with real horror dawning in her face. 'Are you afraid of him? Afraid?' she whispered. She no longer lashed, nor sneered. In spite of every generous impulse in her heart, the icy hand of conviction was closing its hideous grip. She went close to Adam and peered up into his face.

He would not meet her eyes. He would not respond. He shrank from her, a self-confessed weakling, an avowed coward. She thought of the past, and for one moment felt a nausea of sheer disgust sweeping over her. But that she fought and thrust away from her, swaying a little on her feet. 'How could you hurt me so much?' she said, her voice quiet and steady.

At that Adam flinched and reeled, as if he had been stabbed. Covering his working face with his sleeve, he turned to the door, unlocked it, and blundered to the stair head. Behind him he heard dry sobs, racking, merciless as a sentence of death. He lurched down to face Charles Auric, his eyes burning in their wasted sockets.

'She is waiting for you,' said Adam. 'But listen to me! You will never see me again — but before God,

if you betray me as you betrayed your uniform I'll come back from whatever hell is mine and haunt you to your dying day!'

Charles hardly heard the threat. If he had heard it, he would only have despised it as puerile in its impossibility of fulfilment. This too Adam knew, looking after him. Already Charles was mounting the stairs. Already Diane would be waiting for his kisses to dry her tears. For those two were lovers. And neither would have a thought for Adam Konski, staggering, self-condemned, self-mutilated, like a wounded animal, along the Wilno streets.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TABLES TURNED

It would have been pleasant to have been able to record that in that moment when Charles Auric saw his wife again he spared a thought of pity, even of remorse, for his rival. But it would not have been true. As he lacked any superstition to be moved by Adam's parting threats, so he lacked both the mercy and the imagination to give him another thought. It was in the full flush of a triumph that he now conceived to be absolute that Charles entered the room which Adam those months before had entered to be enrolled in the company of 'The Sacred Flies.' He stood in the doorway, tall, smiling, debonair — a fine figure of a man, and knowing it — and flung his arms wide.

'Diane!' he said.

The girl, crouching by the window, did not stir. Her head was bowed upon her outstretched arms. For once she did not look graceful — merely crumpled, and altogether stricken.

'Diane,' he repeated. 'It is I — Charles!'

Still she did not move. A little of his fiery exultation died within his breast in spite of himself. That

realization angered him; and to crush it down he crossed the room swiftly with long strides, and caught the girl strongly by the shoulders.

At that touch she moved, with something of the deadly speed of a striking snake; wrenched herself free, and stood back against the wall, white-faced and panting.

'No — no —— It's not true,' she stammered.

Her hands went out, wavering and pitiful, as if to fend off attack.

Charles stood back and laughed. 'Come, come, my dear,' he said. 'Surely you're pleased to see me. It's a long time ——'

'Stop!' cried Diane desperately. 'Stop! Or I shall go mad before your eyes!'

Charles laughed again. But this time the laugh rang false as hell. 'Am I so changed?' he asked at last.

'We are all changed,' said the girl, and added desperately, 'Look at me!'

'As lovely as ever.'

'Liar!'

Charles recoiled a pace; stood staring.

'What have you done to Adam?'

'That young fool!'

'Young perhaps — fool perhaps — but a gallant gentleman,' said Diane. With the hurling of 'liar'

in Charles's face, she had broken the danger of incipient hysteria. Now she spoke quietly, and with an intense conviction. 'What can you have done?' she repeated. 'How could you turn a brave man to a coward, a lover to a renegade? What devil serves your needs?'

Charles thrust his hands into the pockets of his breeches. 'So you turned to him, did you?' he said coldly. 'You forgot our love, my honour and your own! I could not have believed it!'

Diane's lips curled. 'You remembered them so well in Moscow,' she returned, and looked away.

'I played the game that the Emperor's service demanded,' he shrugged. 'If you choose to believe a Pole's calumnies, of course I can say no more.'

'A Pole,' Diane repeated softly. 'A Pole, who, because he loved me, tried to save your reputation at the price of his own happiness. I loved you, Charles. Do you think that I could mistake you, that day I saw you in the Moscow streets, and you turned your back and ran! Ran to another woman! Let her send the message that you were dead! For all I know sent that message yourself! You call Adam Konski a fool! You think me a fool! Look to your own folly!'

'I am not here to quarrel or chop phrases,' parried Charles. 'He is gone, and I am here. What is past

is past. I am content to leave it so. Let us kiss, and be friends, Diane. We must be sensible.'

'We must. That is why I will never willingly see you again — why I will die gladly before I let you touch me again. The Charles I loved and married died in "The Madman's House," and was buried with his uniform.'

'Very pretty phrases to cloak adultery!' sneered Charles.

'Why come back to me?' she continued. 'What can I do for your career? My beauty is gone. I have dishonoured you. Go back to France. The star of the Bourbons is rising. Mount a white cockade! Soon fat Louis will need a captain for the Royal Guards. What have you to do any longer in Poland?'

'You are my wife. What is mine I keep. I don't choose to be known for a cuckold, my dear!'

'Can you help it?' flared Diane.

'So you think you will join your chivalrous young friend, is that it? My dear Diane, I know his breed so well. At this moment I have no doubt he is riding to certain death with a resolution worthy of a better cause, having yielded you back to his elder and better! They are fighting along the Kowno road.'

'And God has let you live!'

Charles crossed himself and bowed mockingly. In a flash Diane was past him, but his hands were on

her shoulders before she could cross the threshold. 'Let me go!' she gasped.

'This campaign has seen enough heroic death, my dear. Adam Konski goes alone to his own place, alive or dead.'

The futile attempt at flight had exhausted the last poor remnant of the girl's strength. Her legs gave way beneath her, and she sank to the floor, only twisting sideways with a final effort to get free of Charles's hold.

Stifling a curse he stooped to gather her limp body into his arms. At that moment there rang out in the hall below a guttural word of command, and the tramp of heavy boots. Charles straightened himself abruptly and moved to the head of the stairs.

He found himself facing two of the guardsmen of Eugene, the Viceroy of Italy. Two steps below the soldiers, stiff and lean as a stork, was Kestner, 'the Alsatian jackal.' A gruff order, and two muskets were levelled at Charles Auric's breast. His cheeks whitened, and his hands went above his head.

'By what right ——?' he stammered.

'Captain Auric,' said the Alsatian, 'I have orders to arrest you as a spy and a traitor.'

'You!' burst out Charles. 'The man who sold us to "The Spider"!'

'The man whose plans and counter-plans are too

great for you; the man who takes no account of his pawns,' said Kestner. 'You child to measure brains with me!'

'I demand fair trial,' said Charles through white lips.

'You will get it,' said Kestner. 'But it may serve to spare you false hopes when I tell you that one of Rostopchin's body-servants was in my pay. He has just crossed into our lines. I know all your dealings in Moscow. You are here *en civile*. We have no time just now for such trifles as petty traitors. You will be tried now by court-martial. You will be shot before the army leaves Wilno.'

The two soldiers closed in.

'But you yourself!' cried Charles. 'What of your own dealings?'

Kestner smiled. 'I follow my own road,' said he. 'If I turn against the Emperor at the last, I do not choose to neglect my duty meanwhile, nor to sacrifice his interests to such as you. Take him away!'

For an instant Charles swayed. Then with a supreme effort he steadied himself. 'One moment,' he said quietly. 'May I get at my snuff-box?'

The Alsatian nodded.

'I am infinitely grateful,' said Charles.

He slid his right hand into the breast pocket of his coat, whipped out a pistolet, and blew out his brains.

As the smoke cleared away Kestner was seen nodding pleasantly. 'So much I expected — a neat shot — and it saves so much trouble.' He turned away, followed by his guards, and the door closed behind them.

Ten minutes later, Diane, hatless, grey-faced, but clinging indomitably to a stolen saddle, was driving an almost foundered charger with whip and spur along the Kowno road.

CHAPTER XXIV

IGNATIUS RIDES HOME

For the sake of the task he had set himself it was as well for Adam that the tale he had told was beyond possibility of redemption. Nervously and physically he was at the end of his tether. His head ached and swam. His limbs shook. He leaned helplessly against a railing, seeing nothing but Diane's face against a background of swirling darkness — Diane's face set in its expression of surprise and incredulous horror: hearing nothing but her dry rasping sobs. He was cursed, jostled, jeered at for a drunk. To neither curse, jostling, nor jeer, did he pay heed. He had faced the end of his world. And though something in the depth of his heart abused him for a sentimental fool — bade him go back even then and deny the denial of his manhood — his mind was fixed courageously, and was most strangely at rest. Only his nerves and his flesh tortured him. His essential self, the soul of Adam Konski, purged of weaknesses, of ambitions, of fear and of hope alike, stood erect, naked, unashamed, and tranquil. So that soon even his battered grimy body yielded to his soul's discipline, and was once again at his service.

He thrust himself away from the support of the railings with a fierce movement, and moved off along the narrow street. His stride was now mechanical, his appearance that of a sleep-walker. But brain and muscles were renewing contact, resuming their duties. And suddenly he was aware that he was standing outside the house where his uncle Ignatius had been quartered — the house where the Alsatian, Kestner, had enrolled him in the ranks of 'The Sacred Flies.'

Obeying a natural impulse, he tried the door. It was fast shut. Fired with a sudden exasperation, he flung his shoulder against it, and it yielded. He entered, and walked slowly up the dusty staircase to that room in which his fate had been decided. All was silence, dirt, and emptiness. Only in an inner bedroom were traces of fairly recent human occupation — blankets, the remnants of a meal decaying on a table, a rusty razor beneath a mirror, a basin half full of dirty water, and on the bed a large metal box.

Adam opened it incuriously. For the time being he must do something; anything to delay the moment at which he must face the problem of what ultimately he must do, where he must go. He flung back the lid, and drew a sharp breath.

How it had come there — whose property it was

— only God knew. But there it lay, carefully folded and enwrapped: the white and amaranth and silver of the full dress uniform of a lieutenant of the Polish Light Horse of the Imperial Guard: the uniform of his regiment, which he had never worn. With it was *czapka* and sabre. And as he unfolded tunic and trousers, stroking their magnificence with apprehensive fingers, a thought came into Adam's mind, so clear, so simple, so essentially satisfying, that hot tears started to his eyes and in his heart he laid away the memory of Diane and of his love, as a man might conceal some sacred thing in the safety of a shrine before lying down to die.

He stripped off his rags; and in their place drew on the tight trousers, buttoned the tunic, buckled belt and sword and spurs, and set the *czapka*, slightly tilted at an angle, on his head. Peering into the dusty mirror he saw a grotesque figure: an old man, in obviously borrowed finery, with stooping shoulders, and blinking sunken eyes that yet held a strangely peaceful expression. But to Adam his reflection was not absurd. He saw it as the reflection of his life: attainment realized too late; a poor lover, an indifferent soldier, wearing the symbols of what had once been the summit of his desires. And as he looked, he smiled . . .

Hardly conscious of what he did, he left the room

and went down again to stand in the open doorway and gaze uncomprehendingly at the clamour and rioting of the streets. Suddenly he looked up. He heard a voice yelling Polish oaths and saw a lancer forcing a lathered horse through the press. The man was rocking in his saddle, and there was foam on his lips. In the splendours of his new uniform Adam must have appeared to him to be a colonel at least. With a wrench at his reins and a final jab of his spurs he drove the horse through the throng to where Adam stood.

'Ponari!' he gasped out, and pointed back over his shoulder. 'The treasury of the army! The horses cannot drag the carts up the frozen slope! And the Cossacks are closing in! I was sent back for help! I was hit ——' And on the last word the lancer crashed to the ground at Adam's feet. He was dead.

Adam stooped over the body. The man was a trooper of his own Light Horse. Somewhere along the western road his regiment, what remained of it, was fighting. It was enough. Adam sprang into the empty saddle, wrenched the charger round, and rode savagely away, forcing his passage with unsparing oaths and blows.

Men stared incredulous and amazed to see a figure, reminiscent of the vanished pomps of almost forgotten processions and parades, go thundering

past, with a rattle of hoofs, and a clatter of scabbard against stirrup-iron. Soon Adam was clear of the accursed town and galloping free towards the west. The wind sang past his ears. The snow gleamed under pale sunshine. With a sword at his side, a good horse beneath him, and a fight against odds at the end of the road, Adam could demand no more of life. His cheeks flamed. His blood coursed furiously through his veins. His eyes shone. A song, an old Polish song of war and hunting, burst from his lips. He stood in his stirrups and peered ahead for the first sight of the Ponari hill, breaking with its contour the flat horizon of the plains.

The Ponari hill was to win an unenviable reputation in the annals of Poland. It was this frozen slope which, a hundred years later, was to be as impassable to the gun-horses of Pilsudski's batteries on the retreat from Kieff, as in 1812 it had proved to the draught-beasts of Napoleon's heavy wagons. One of the first carts to attempt the defile had overturned across the road a little after dawn. The road had been blocked, and, as so often before in the retreat, the halting of the convoy had meant the almost immediate cutting of traces, and the seizing of the horses by stragglers afoot. Accordingly not less than four or five millions in silver and gold was stranded on the side of the hill. And it was a curious com-

mentary on the consistency of human nature that, even in their present extremity, the soldiers for the most part stopped to burden their wasted frames with the precious metals, so utterly useless in their circumstances. They did this freely, some even staggering away bent double under sacks of double napoleons, or smaller bags of five-franc pieces; for Marshal Ney, who with some Hessian infantry was holding off a Cossack attack on the left flank, had ordered the bullion to be opened to the men, as it could not be saved from the Russians.

This was the scene that met Adam's eyes as he came galloping furiously along the Kowno road. Very black against the snow, the abandoned waggons gave an absurd impression of dominoes laid in a line face downward upon a white cloth. Scattered along their motionless line the most avaricious of the stragglers still fought and quarrelled over fantastic bargaining of five-franc for hundred-franc pieces. Away to the left crackled the stubborn musketry of Ney's unyielding defence. But it was to the other flank, to the right of Ponari, that Adam turned his eyes. Perhaps a mile from the road there surged and eddied a combat of mounted men; a swirl of tossing manes and flashing blades. He did not need to be told what it was. He knew. It was his own regiment in a death-grapple with a second Cossack onslaught on the foundered waggon-train. . . .

For a moment Adam reined in. He wanted to breathe his charger, to settle his reins comfortably, to loosen his sabre in its scabbard. He had no opportunity for any of these things. At that moment the dark circle, fringed with the sparkling light of sword-play, broke and dissolved. And, Adam caught his breath, for it was the Poles who had turned their backs, and were riding madly for the road, every man for himself. In the further background the Russian horsemen clustered uncertainly into close formation, hesitating to press the pursuit, as if incredulous of the reality of their victory.

Adam drove in his spurs and shot out to meet the routed lancers. And as he rode a fierce joy welled up in his heart. For there, his great voice raving curses, roaring futile commands and exhortations to stand, rode Ignatius Konski among his flying troopers. He beat the nearest men savagely with the flat of his sabre. His face was convulsed with fury, and black with powder. His tunic was unbuttoned, showing his hairy chest streaked with blood. One sleeve was ripped from cuff to epaulette. His *czapka* had gone. But his single eye glared as unconquerably as ever, and he handled a huge chestnut stallion with one hand as though it had been a lady's hack. Under Adam's eyes Ignatius suddenly drove to the front of his men, snatched a trumpet from his trumpeter,

and swung his horse round with one mighty wrench of his left arm. The rally pealed out across that stricken field, compelling as Gabriel's trump.

'Stand, you dogs! You craven rats! You curs!' yelled Ignatius Konski's croaking voice. And, dropping his reins, he gripped the first fugitive by the shoulders, forcing him back onto the crupper of his horse.

For an instant the issue was in doubt. Adam expected to see his uncle ridden over, even cut down, by his own men. But he had not before seen Ignatius in the field, not felt the iron control of his fighting discipline. The lancers pulled up their lathered chargers, and grouped together, some bleeding, all breathing hard, and sullenly shame-faced. Half a mile away the Cossacks were wheeling outwards deliberately into line. Ignatius looked once at the enemy; then at his own men.

'You have disgraced me, yourselves, and the regiment,' he rasped out. 'Our honour is behind us. You will now follow me to regain it!' He flung the trumpet back to his trumpeter. 'Form single line!' he roared. 'Who the devil is this?'

'This' was Adam, who chose this moment to halt beside his uncle and salute. 'I think,' said he, 'that I am just in time.'

Ignatius stared at him. 'Young popinjay!' he

growled. 'What in God's name are you doing here?'

'I thought you might be short of officers by now,' said Adam.

Ignatius exploded in a great laugh. 'Come to show your spirit? And dressed up for a fancy-dress ball! You've come to the wrong place, my young lady-killer! This is not a ball-room. This is war!'

He looked away abruptly to where the Cossacks were already moving forward, like a remorseless wave crested with shining foam. And, turning his back on his nephew, he snapped out to his trumpeter; 'Sound the charge!'

Adam flushed. But there was no time for argument or quarrel. A mutter growled from the Polish rank, and the trumpet sang out defiantly across the snow. With a click and a rattle the lancers moved forward; and Ignatius guided his chestnut neatly through a gap between two files, cursed them for not closing up properly, and rode out in front of his men, his sabre pointing forward at the enemy.

Turning for a last shout, bidding his Poles ride home, Ignatius found Adam almost at his elbow. And at last he was convinced. He grinned ferociously, and half lifted his weapon as if in salute. But he said no word, and he did not turn his head again.

For now they were stretching into a steady gallop.

Men and horses alike were drawing upon their last ounce of strength, and the last courage of despair. Behind him Adam felt rather than heard the increasing terrible roar and rattle of the charging squadron. Between his horse's ears he saw the ground whirl beneath him; beyond rode Ignatius, firm as a rock in his saddle, his right hand immovably flung forward, as though he and his sword were a single javelin launched at the Russian line. Quite unconsciously Adam cried out, and his voice was caught up into a savage cheer: the expression of wild exhilaration arising among men going together to imminent death: joy of battle, of riding, of brave deeds.

With that cheer ringing above them in the frosty air, the Polish Light Horse crashed into the Russian advance. In the instant they shivered the Cossack line to fragments, and redeemed their honour. But they were to pay in full measure. They were outnumbered five to one, and the enemy's horses were almost fresh. The Poles could not reform, and wheel, and charge again. They were spent. And once again the fight closed grimly into a dreadful shifting circle, with the Poles hemmed more and more closely into its centre, and dropping man by man.

It was only after the first shock when the lines

met, that Adam realized that in the excitement of the charge he had never drawn his sabre. He had ridden weaponless, as though at a fence. Now he wrenched out the steel and whirled it above his head as two Cossacks drove past him at his uncle's left side.

The nearer Russian glimpsed the clumsy handling of Adam's weapon, and his absence of guard. A tiny pressure of one knee, and his shaggy little pony pivoted nimbly. The lance shot forward. And Adam felt a searing agony of pain stab under his left shoulder-blade.

He dropped sabre and reins, and lurched forward on his charger's neck. His eyes filled and swam; but he saw Ignatius, still towering above the battle, his sword red from point to hilt. And as Adam closed his eyes, reeled, and went down among the trampling hoofs, he heard the harsh compelling voice thundering still above the grinding and clash of steel. . . .

It seemed to him centuries later that Adam came back to consciousness. He was lying on a rough straw pallet, and Diane was bending over him.

He blinked helplessly, most firmly convinced that he was in paradise, except that his whole body burned and throbbed with pain. Then he felt

Diane's lips on his own, and he was glad to sink back again into oblivion, careless of explanations. To have sought death and found only life seemed in itself more than enough.

Only days later, when with Diane he was being jolted over the Prussian roads with Eugene's baggage train, could he piece together the story of Charles Auric's suicide, of Diane's mad gallop to the Ponari battlefield, and how, after Ney's Hessians and *voltigeurs* had fallen back from the flank just in time to drive off the victorious Cossacks, she had found him crushed and bleeding in the centre of a ring of dead men.

It had been his uncle Ignatius Konski who had saved him from being battered into pulp; his uncle who had fallen, pierced with nine wounds, and covered his nephew's body with his own.

THE END

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VAL GIELGUD

says of himself: 'It seems hard to believe that any one should really want to know that I was born in London, have always lived there, and would rather live there than elsewhere, though I hanker for the Riviera in the winter; that my father is Polish while my mother is English; that Ellen Terry is my great-aunt; or that I love caviare and loathe oysters — although I suppose that it may be true that all such things affect one's work to some extent. I must also confess to a weakness for beer, Aldous Huxley, Tchekov, Dostoevsky, Cabell, Donn Byrne, John Buchan, and Emil Ludwig, to say nothing of sunsets, railway stations and newspapers, and crime.

'I adore cats, smoke incessantly, and write best between midnight and dawn straight onto a typewriter. I travel on the smallest provocation whenever I can afford it. I look forward immensely to seeing America. I read on an average four novels a week, and see at least two or three films. My main hobby is the study of military history. It is useless my having political views, as all my inclinations are feudal, for which there is no longer space in a world of petrol and radio.'

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